The last sermon at St. Mark's - what great pearls of wisdom can I impart? What great guru, what great spiritual master can guide me at a time like this? If you remember, and if you do I’m most impressed, that on my first sermon here on September 4, 2011, I referred to the imaginary publication, “How to Be a Rector for Dummies” as my guide for the coming years. In the same spirit, I can only refer to Yogi Berra and a few “yogi-isms” to get me through this sermon.

To start, one of the most famous, “It’s déjà vu all over again”. And, well it is. The date was June 26, 1988. Almost exactly 33 years ago today (Yogi? The future ain’t what it used to be – nope we’re off a day), My last sermon at my last Catholic parish, Sacred Heart Church in Portland. They gave me this fine rocking chair as a present which seemed appropriate to preach from today. Hey, it’s déjà vu all over again. But what is more interesting, and maybe you have to be a math major to be excited about this one is, well 33 years ago is divisible by 3 and that means in the 3-year lectionary cycle – well this exact same gospel we just heard, the curing of Jairus’ daughter and the healing of the Syro-Phoenician woman, was the same gospel on the last Sunday in June in 1988. What a coincidence! Enough with the math. The basic homiletical question each preacher faces, “What is the Holy Spirit saying to the people of St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, Waterville Maine through these ancient texts?” Not giving you the same sermon as back then – and I’m not going near that first reading – death of Jonathan – ain’t touching that one - but one line from that gospel stuck out to me 33 years ago and one line sticks out now, Mark 5:36b “Do not fear only believe”.

But I like this one from the Catholic translation I used 33 years ago, “Fear is useless; what is needed is trust”. Have we had reasons to be afraid this past couple years? A worldwide pandemic strikes, 3.9 million deaths worldwide, and 619,000 in the US alone. A presidential election that became divisive with continued threats to our own democracy. A greater awareness of the inherent racism in our country with corresponding denial again leading us to completely different views on the racial history of our country. I could go on but maybe the fears are more personal. Our aging bodies, our failing health, strife or conflict in our households, or maybe that fear gets applied to our church, our congregation as we face a transition. “Will we continue to thrive? What will happen? What about these other congregations that have closed or seem on the verge of closing?” Is there anything at all to be afraid of. For the last 14 months, a group of members have been gathering for Evening Prayer at 5:30 on Thursday and Compline at 7:30 on Friday night. I have said the
same prayer for the last 14 months – we pray for those who have been diagnosed with COVID-19, we pray for any facing unemployment or economic hardship and we pray for anyone who is afraid of the present or the future. And to anyone afraid of the present or future, Jesus today says, “Fear is useless; what is needed is trust”. That doesn’t mean we have to be stupid, ignoring known facts but it does mean we can’t let fear paralyze us. What would Yogi say? “When you see a fork in the road take it”. Don’t live in fear; don’t dwell in fear. What did Jesus say, “She’s not dead; she’s asleep”. That can easily apply to our lives, our faith, our health, our church community. Pray, discern seek wise counsel and then take a fork.

We can learn about taking that fork from the two key figures in today’s gospel, Jairus the leader who finds that all the usual advantages and experience that go with his office suddenly avail him nothing? And the Syro-Phoenician woman, the one who has endured much and isn’t sure she can bear any more? On the surface these are two very different people, the have and the have-not. What do they share in common? They admit their vulnerability; only in admitting our vulnerability are we able to receive help, and only by owning our moments of desperation are we willing to try something out of the ordinary, discover the courage to be and act differently. So Jairus asks and the Syro-Phoenician reaches out her hand to touch Jesus’ cloak. And – healing happens – miracles happen.

Frederick Buechner said it this way, 

*We have within us, each one of us, so much more power than we ever spend, such misers of miracles are we, such pinch-penny guardians of grace.*

So whether you relate more to the have, Jairus; or the have-not, the Syro-Phoenician woman, the examples are there of reaching out in faith. And notice who gets healed first, Only when the outcast woman is restored to true “daughterhood” can the daughter of the synagogue be restored to true life. That is the faith of the privileged must learn from the faith of the poor.

So we come to the end. Your advice, Yogi? “When you see a fork in the road, take it”. Seemingly we separate here and take different forks. My fork heads toward retirement. What will I do, Yogi? “I usually take a two hour nap from one to four.” Sounds like good advice.

So we won’t see each other for a while. Our forks will take us on different roads. But more importantly we are united by our common mission as disciples of Jesus. We are very small, but equally very important, parts of the universal Church in our mission to reconcile the entire world, to bring compassion and justice to our immediate world. I will remember all of you with great fondness and hopefully some of you will do likewise.
Yogi? “It ain’t over till it’s over”. Well, right Yogi but nothing’s really over. We all continue on our mission, we’ve just taken different forks. Fear is useless what is needed is trust. I can leave you with no better message. Trust in the Spirit, step out in faith, don’t be a miser of miracles, a penny-pinching guardian of grace. The healer is in our midst each Sunday here, every day in our own lives. Ask for what you need; reach out in faith and trust.