

The Church of the Pilgrimage
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo
July 1, 2018

Mark 5:21-43

When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. He pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." So Jesus went with him. A large crowd followed and pressed around him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'" But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher anymore?" Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, "Don't be afraid; just believe." He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him. After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "*Talitha kum!*" (which means "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"). Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this and told them to give her something to eat.

Communion Meditation

So today we move from last week's story -- Jesus stilling the storm and the disciples asking the question who is this that even the wind and waves obey him -- to a healing story, or rather two healing stories, two stories wrapped around each other, a story within a story.

Pastors tend to like this passage because really often our days are a series of interruptions. We decide today is the day we are doing worship preparations for the next few months or writing newsletter articles...or some such task. We come to the office with great intent of focus. But the phone rings, and rings again. Someone just drops by. Most pastors know if you want to get something done, be sure you really *can* get it done, you stay home for a few hours in the morning. The office, you see, is where you come expecting to have surprises, unscheduled visits, requests for conversation or other matters needing attention.

Interruptions...and how we handle interruptions...it's clearly part of the spiritual life. So we pastors like this idea of Jesus headed in one direction, only to find his attentions diverted elsewhere because in the church the one thing we try not to say is "Sorry, I'm too busy" and because we know that actually some of the most meaningful ministry happens in these moments when we are, for want of a better word interrupted.

But maybe there is more going on in our story today than Jesus and his capacity to be present to the given moment.

So, let's look a little closer. Jairus is a well to do man, a religious leader, a man with a certain degree of power and authority. We know Jesus got into an antagonistic relationship with many of the religious leaders, but there appears to be none of that here. Jairus falls to his knees, he shows his faith and belief in Jesus healing power. And he asks for something -- for his daughter, hovering on the edge of life, to be made well.

While they are on their way to her, Jesus has the crowds pressing in on him. It might have made the disciples roll their eyes when Jesus asks, "who touched me?" because honestly that day, who *didn't*? It was a mosh pit, so many people crowding around Jesus eager to hear him speak, hoping he might heal them too. But Jesus stops, and asks the question – I picture his eye sin search mode, searching for her.

As one commentator says, "It is as though the whole of heaven and earth stops in its tracks until she, the woman with the hemorrhage, becomes known to him." (Mark Edington, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, volume 3, p. 190)

This summer some of us in the church are reading *I'm Proud of You: My Friendship with Fred Rogers*. A quick read, it shares the friendship Texas journalist Tim Madigan shared with Mister Rogers of Mister Rogers Neighborhood. As Tim Madigan went through a marriage crisis, and then the death of a close family member, Mister Rogers encouraged him, guided him, strengthened him mostly by letters, and by short emails. But prior to all that happening, he helped Madigan by affirming him in the midst of his depression. Fred signed his letters to Tim Madigan IPOY (I'm Proud of You) and in so doing became both a father figure, and a source of transformation for Madigan.

Mister Rogers was a member of a church I worked at years ago, and I can recognize his gentle but insistent way in the letters and emails the book contains. Mister Rogers had those "soft eyes" people talk about, eyes that saw the good in people, and that regularly affirmed that good. He wasn't just about offering wisdom either, he regularly told others how they were helping *him* to live, helping him to see important things. He also was almost what you'd call vigilant about being in relationship with people. Very intentional about everything he did, including how he stayed in relationship with people.

Reading this book will make you think about people in your life who have given you that extra energy, attention, or encouragement you needed at a particular time. It may make you think about people that you have to stretch a bit to stay in relationship with. It may make you want to be more like Fred Roger yourself. Our world would be a lot more peaceful, a lot less fractious, a lot more life-affirming if more people were like Fred, if more people were as insistent on relationship in the way that he was.

But let's get back to the woman Jesus healed on his way to heal Jairus's daughter. Who was she anyway? She is a bold woman, because in so many ways, she is breaking the "shoulds" of her time. She should have kept her distance, because her issue of blood made her unclean. She should have called out from a discreet remove, but she comes close, she touches him, making Jesus also ritually unclean. For maybe a second you think that could be why he asks who touched me. But clearly that is not the issue. For instead of calling her "unclean" Jesus names her "daughter". Instead of admonishing her outrageous trespass, he praises her faith. Instead of justifiable anger, Jesus bids her go in peace. (Michael Lindvall, Year B, vol 3, p. 192)

This is such a fascinating story, this story within a story. On his way to heal Jairus's daughter, Jesus heals a woman who could not be more different from Jairus. Jairus is privileged, powerful, accepted, male. She is none of those things. She has been bleeding for twelve long years, as many years as Jairus's daughter has lived on the earth, and this illness, this affliction has made her isolated from others, from community. And Jesus stops for her. He seeks her out. And there's something here about the order of events, the order of healing: *the needs of the marginalized and vulnerable person are addressed before the needs of the celebrated and the powerful.*

Maybe we didn't see that at first glance. When a wealthy man wants Jesus to heal his daughter, he must wait for the healing first of a destitute woman. What if we understood this healing story as a parable, as something that is laid alongside or thrown up against our lives? Is it not saying something profound, these two stories wrapped together? Is it not saying something we need to hear about no life being more important than any other, about our living in interdependence with one another, about our all being beloved and precious children of God? Perhaps there will be no larger healing, no healing of the nations until we heal this fundamental tendency we have to value one person over another.

Jairus daughter was a precious child of God and so is this woman, this "Daughter". The story is less about Jesus being interruptible as it is about Jesus eyes, eyes which beheld the need for healing and wholeness in every person.

Once at a communion service at that Pittsburgh church I watched an interesting moment. A man who was a doctor, well known in his field, had just received the sacrament. He walked by the pew of a very troubled young man, a man who used to come into the church to "tickle the ivories" on the piano because it soothed his rather tormented soul.

The older man looked at the younger and gave him a nod. The younger man smiled and nodded back.

I loved that church in Pittsburgh very much. It was as if Fred Rogers spirit was infused in it. It was a more human place--a kinder place-- than any church I had been part of before. Whenever I think of that church, it brings me hope.

You might think that communion, the sacrament we celebrate today, is about us remembering Jesus death – and it is of course that. It is also about our coming together in simple human need. If we are to live well together, we have to recognize the common humanity we share. We all need bread. We all need love and attention. We all need to be able to tell our stories, to speak of our broken places without shame or judgment. The table here today reminds us of our common need.

See, the truth that all are welcome at Jesus table – it reminds us that Jesus doesn't call us into the church so we can "help the less fortunate". He calls us here so we can experience this sense of kinship, intimacy, and connection for which we were made. So, we can experience this place where everyone belongs, everyone matters, no one is dis-regarded. We are living in times when this attitude and basic understanding is needed as never before. Though this could feel like a preacher's interruption, a diversion on the road, it might be important to lift up the fact that not all prayers, not all pleas for help result in total restoration of health the way these stories today do.

You know how it can be. We pray for someone who has lost their way, and still they move in a questionable direction, while we feel more and more helpless. We pray for a marriage that is struggling, and look, now they've separated. We pray for someone with a recovery struggle, but we hear of relapse. And over time we think maybe healing isn't always a fix. Healing can be a peace that comes in the midst of trial, or disappointment. Healing can be realizing that we have received a power that has come to us, that God has been with us in times we might otherwise have succumbed to despair. Healing can come in realizing what matters most in life – love, and human connection – before it is too late to realize that.

My takeaway on today's story within the story is that the person in front of us whoever he or she may be always carries the possibility for a sacred moment, a time when the human divine connection can be realized. For healing comes in relationship. Put another way, we are shaped and made human by our relationship to other people. Relationships make us human and whole. This weekend many people took to the streets to protest our governments immigration policy. There are times when people feel compelled to speak out, feel an urgency about that. Can we engage in social justice work out of love for our country and keep loving those who feel differently than we do? Can we be that insistent on relationship, the way Jesus was?

As the contemporary Scottish philosopher John MacMurray once phrased it, "I need "you" in order to be me." I don't think that means only people who think just like I do.

Jesus may have dazzled by taming the wind and the waves, But he also had a power and authority that came in this careful tending to human need, this honoring of all persons. *I need "you" in order to be me.* May we gather round this table. And may we go forth as the church of Jesus Christ sharing this awareness in each and every encounter.

Amen.