

June 28, 2015

“On Healing, Restoration and the Compassion of Jesus”

Sermon by Rev. Robert English



Mark 5: 21-43

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.' So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.' Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?"' He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?' But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.' He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

The passage from Mark's gospel continues a wild journey of Jesus and his disciples as they crisscross their way through the region known as the Galilee. Last week we heard the story of Jesus and the disciples out on the Lake when suddenly this storm kicks up and the disciples, overcome with fear for their lives, wake Jesus up and he calms the storm.

In today's reading, Jesus and his disciples are again on the move across the lake of Galilee and upon reaching the other side we hear that Jesus is confronted with this huge spiritual need within the community. This reading is in fact a story within a story; two stories of healing and restoration which the gospel writer intentionally puts together to convey something about who Jesus is, who God is, and what life looks like in God's kingdom.

This story within a story and the story of Jesus calming the storm reveal to us a very real truth that we live with each and every day.... life happens.

You know that phrase, "Life happens?" It usually used like this: "I really meant to do X, Y or Z today, but you know life happens...." You see, if Jesus or the disciples were anything like me, and maybe like you, they probably landed on the lake shore with a plan or an agenda for the rest of the day- travel across the lake, check.... get some lunch, check (no one likes a hungry traveler), get settled in at our Air BNB, check, go for a walk around the neighborhood to get a feel for the village, check, find a place for dinner, check, and so on and so on.

And yet in this story we see that life happens, that real human, communal, individual, spiritual need trumps all of our best plans or agendas, or the vision we might have for our day. John Lennon once said, "Life is what happens to you while you are busy making other plans."

So we see Jesus, the one who we follow, when confronted by a desperate father asking for Jesus' help, he goes. He abandons all of his other plans for the day to be there with them. It is an act of deep compassion; it is an act of grace.

How many of us are so tied to our agendas that we miss the opportunity to embody that compassion for another?

That's the thing about life, about the struggles and suffering that we go through. It doesn't come at a convenient time for us. It doesn't follow our schedule. It comes when it comes. It happens to us and those around us. And like Jesus, when we experience it in the face of another, sometimes you just have to go, you have to abandon everything else and just be there however you can.

It is on his way to Jairus' house, we see, yet again, this moment where life happens. A woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years reaches out to touch Jesus and in doing so he stops mid-stride, looks around and asks who touched me. The woman emerges from the crowd and falls at Jesus' feet with awe and trembling and Jesus says to her, "Daughter, your faith has saved you, go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

Some of the true power of this story is lost on us, as we have this tendency to focus on the supernatural parts of these healing stories. We hone in on this aspect which usually leads us to ask deep and difficult questions and usually we just end up writing off these stories as myth or legend.

I think that it is crucial that when we read this story, we do the hard work of putting it into context and drawing forth from the text itself, the meaning it presents to us.

One thing that you may or may not know about the world that Jesus and his disciples inhabited is that there were pretty strict purity laws that many religious people tried to follow. These laws were in place for both spiritual and physical reasons. If someone was ill or sick, they were completely isolated from their community in order not to infect others spiritually or physically. If someone suffered from a chronic illness or disease they became, over time, more and more marginalized and alienated from their community.

In some ways this hasn't really changed all that much. I am reminded by our brothers and sisters who have physical impairments and, more often than not, are placed on the margins and isolated from the life of the community.

So when this woman reaches out and touches Jesus, she is acting with a spiritual courage and boldness that is hard to even imagine. She is claiming for herself in that moment a connection, a relationship to a man, a person of authority and power that normally, would have been beyond her reach. Jesus, noticing that he had been touched, stops and asks who has touched him. When she presents herself before him in an act of humble submission she is filled with awe and wonder. His response is to call her "daughter."

What a tremendous act of empowering compassion Jesus shows this woman. He addresses her with a title that had been stripped from her years ago, daughter of God, beloved child of the Most High. Had we been there, had we seen this in person, it would have been scandalous and shocking, because in that moment Jesus offers her saving grace that restores her fully into right relationship with the community and with God. By simply calling her daughter, he is offering her a spiritual truth that has the power to impart peace and holy restoration into her brokenness and draw her into the fullness of life. She goes from outcast to being in holy relationship with Jesus; she goes from abandoned to being a beloved daughter of God. Jesus shows us a different way, a different kind of healing, the healing that restores us into relationship with God and with one another.

See the problem for us is that we often equate healing and curing. We think that being cured is the same thing as being healed. The truth is Jesus shows us that it's more than that. People can be cured of all sorts of physical ailments and still carry with them a deep spiritual woundedness, a woundedness that infects their entire being. Or there are people who never experience being cured from an illness of physical impairment, but are bathed in grace and peace and the healing presence of God's life-giving love flows from them even in the midst of pain or suffering.

Author Rachel Held Evans points to this difference in her book *"Searching for Sunday"* as she writes: "But there is a difference between curing and healing, and I believe the church is called to the slow and difficult work of healing. We are called to enter into one another's pain, anoint it as holy, and stick around no matter the outcome.... The thing about healing, as opposed to curing, is that it is relational. It takes time. It is inefficient, like a meandering river. Rarely does healing follow a straight or well-lit path. Rarely does it conform to our expectations or resolve in a timely manner.... And the truth is, the church doesn't offer a cure. It doesn't offer a quick fix. The church offers death and resurrection. The church offers the messy, inconvenient, gut-wrenching, never-ending work of healing and reconciliation. The church offers grace. "

Like many of you my heart broke as I heard the news of the shooting at Emmanuel AME Church in South Carolina. As the reports came in, I felt overwhelmed with a sense of hopelessness as we saw again the terrible evil of racism and violence that has infected our society. My heart went out to that community, those families, our brothers and sisters in Christ. It seemed like it was not even 24 hours later when I heard the first statements being released by the families of the victims and what I heard, what we heard, in response to all of this pain and evil was a word of grace. The families shared that they were seeking forgiveness for the murderer, they were seeking love in the face of hate, they were seeking healing in the midst of pain. They were extending grace, the grace that knows what it's like when the Psalmist prays, "Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord, Hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy." These beautiful, faithful brothers and sisters were offering a costly grace, the grace that comes with Jesus Christ crucified. This last week they gathered for the first of the funeral services to be held at Emmanuel, the funeral of Ethel Lance. Her grandson spoke and said, "My grandmother was so close to God that she only knew how to love, she knew nothing of hate. Her legacy is one of love."

What a witness to us and to our world; that the church should be about healing, that this gut-wrenching, never-ending work is our business. That we follow in the way of the one who enters into the suffering of others, to bear that pain alongside them and to bring true healing and restoration to us all. What a witness that the church should be about the love of Jesus, the compassion he extends to everyone, that no one is beyond the reach of his loving embrace... That Jesus give grace to all people, and when I say all I mean ALL, every single human person on this earth, regardless of who they are, or who they love; We follow in the way of Christ, the one who calls us all daughters and sons of God.

And so my brothers and sisters, we are called to live with hope. We are called to live in faith. And we are called to abide in love and remember, always remember that the greatest of these is love.

Thanks be to God. Amen