

Highland Presbyterian Church
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – June 30, 2024
A Sermon by Cynthia M. Campbell

Mark 5:21-43

Lamentations 3:22-33

“When were you saved?” The first time I was asked that question, I honestly didn’t know how to answer. And the fact that it was asked during my examination to become a candidate for ordination was, to put it mildly, awkward. I didn’t know I was supposed to describe when I made a decision about my personal relationship with Jesus. All I could say was that I was baptized as an infant; confirmed when I was sixteen; and (despite my doubts) I always knew that I was a beloved child of God. But thanks to the evangelical tradition of American Christianity, “salvation” has come to have a particular (and rather narrow) definition. For many, it means a “spiritual” relationship that essentially guarantees the believer “eternal life.”

The problem is that the New Testament presents us with a much more complicated picture. In our gospel reading, a man named Jairus begs Jesus: “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well.” The CEB says “so that she may be healed.” The New Jerusalem Bible translates it: “that she may be *saved*.” All these translations are correct, because one word in Greek carries several meanings in English: to be healed, to be made well, to be saved, to be made whole, to get your life back. Over and over again, that is what Jesus does for women and men, boys and girls that come to him broken in one way or another. He gives them back their lives.

Our gospel this morning is not one story but two. The beginning and the ending of the reading are about Jairus and his daughter. But that story is interrupted by the story of a desperately sick woman in search of healing. This is one of Mark’s favorite literary devices: to put two stories together like a sandwich so that we read them not sequentially but woven together. We are supposed to let one influence our reading of the other. We are to notice similarities and contrasts. Above all, we are to go deeper and find meanings for our own lives.

The first thing we notice is the contrast between the two main characters. Jairus, who has a name, is a well-known community leader. We don’t expect him to run Jesus down and throw himself at Jesus’ feet. But he is the father of a desperately sick child. Any of you who has had a child with serious illness, or, God forbid, lost a child, knows that this man would give anything – even his own life – to save his child.

The woman, who has no name, is equally desperate. She has been sick for years (twelve years, coincidentally – or not – the entire lifetime of Jairus’ daughter). Many Christian readers have said that the “problem” is that, because of her bleeding, she is “ritually unclean” (based on laws found in Leviticus). By allowing her to touch him, Jesus “crosses a boundary” to the one who is unclean. But Jewish New Testament scholar, Amy-Jill Levine argues convincingly that, in Jesus’ time, the only people that cared about this were (some) Jerusalem Temple priests (none of whom are present here). The real problem that this woman is desperately ill. She has spent all her resources chasing a cure from the first-century health care system. But somehow she has heard

about (or maybe even seen) Jesus of Nazareth. She is convinced that all she needs to do is get close enough to reach out and touch him.

Then, this surprisingly intimate moment: having touched his clothes, the woman feels in her body that she has been healed. At that precise moment, Jesus feels that power had gone out of his body. They have made some kind of real connection that has given this woman back her life. He wants to know who it is. I can see the smile on his face; can't you? Rather than melt away into the crowd, taking her gift of healing with her, the woman comes forward and tells her story. She pours out her tale of suffering and overwhelming joy and profound gratitude. I imagine that Jesus reaches out and helps her stand up and says, "My daughter, your faith has made you well, has saved you, has made you whole."

But here is yet another place where translators have to make choices. The Greek word we translate "faith" means both belief and trust. The problem is that we often think of "belief" in terms of ideas, theological concepts or doctrines. But I don't think that's what Jesus is commending this woman for. He does not bless her for having the right ideas about God; he praises her for trusting God's mercy and entrusting herself to him.

Parenthetically, this is one of the reasons I like the Brief Statement of Faith of the Presbyterian Church so much. It does not say: "I believe in God the Father Almighty." It says: "We trust in God, everywhere the giver and renewer of life." I do, in fact, *think* that God is the creator of all that is, but what keeps me going day to day is trust. Trust that, in the midst of all the chaos, the world's and my own, I belong to God who is the giver and renewer of life.

The woman's story is ended, and Mark pivots back to the story of Jairus and his daughter. Just as Jesus is about to resume walking with this desperate (and doubtless impatient) father, messengers arrive to say that it is too late; his daughter is dead. While Jairus is still trying to absorb the news, Jesus interrupts and says, "Do not fear, only believe." This time, I know how we should translate this: "Don't be afraid. Just *trust* me."

Jesus instructs three of his disciples to come along – Peter, James and John, the three who will also be witnesses to his transfiguration and to his agony in the garden of Gethsemane. When they arrive at the house, neighbors have already begun the mourning process. Jesus tells the crowd that the young woman is not dead but only sleeping, but they laugh him off. They know death when they see it. Undeterred, Jesus takes the girl's parents and his companions into the room where she is. Reaching out to take her hand, Jesus says, "Little girl, get up." And here is yet another moment where translation matters. The Greek verb "get up" is also translated "arise" in describing resurrection. Suddenly, this is much more than a healing story; it is, in fact, a foreshadowing of Jesus' own future resurrection and ours.

These beautiful stories are neither easy to read or to preach. How many of us have prayed deeply, fervently that our loved ones be healed, cured, restored to the way they were before tragedy struck? How many of you yearn for healing and hope? The truth is tragedy strikes. Those we love get desperately ill. And all of us will die. This may lead us to dismiss these stories as so much pious exaggeration. But the longer I journey in life and journey with stories like these, the more I see that they actually invite us to go deeper, into the text and into our own experience.

It is not wrong to pray for healing. It is not futile to ask God to make things better for yourself or ones you love. But there is a wholeness that is deeper than physical healing. There is the possibility of life restored even when the external circumstances of life take you through the valley of the shadow of death. This is the story-line of the entire Bible. Despite the tragedies that we experience – those that are visited upon us by disease and death and those we bring on ourselves by bad choices – despite the pain, we belong to God whose steadfast love for us endures everything. We read the Bible in order to be reminded of this. We let its story become ours; we sing its songs until they become true for us.

The irony is that we do not usually learn this when things are going swimmingly. Hopefully, we all have moments of gratitude and joy when we see the beauty of nature around us; when we experience the beauty of art and music; when we savor the companionship of family and friends. But sustaining trust is generally born out of adversity. The reading from Lamentations is one such example: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God’s mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Lamentations is a series of poems written shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 BCE. It is a saga of unmitigated tragedy and loss. People are dead; the fabric of society is in tatters; the survivors are traumatized. And yet, this kernel of trust endures. And it is there for us to discover again and again.

What is true for us individually is true for us as members of society, as citizens of the planet. Tragedy does not only strike our personal lives; it bombards us daily in the news. The destruction in Gaza and Ukraine and Sudan and in West Louisville are part of our present and our pain. Martin Luther King, Jr. was no stranger to injustice, violence, danger, disappointment, and defeat. A sermon entitled “Shattered Dreams” was written while in jail in Georgia. He reflects on Paul’s dream of visiting Rome and then going on to spread the gospel in Spain. Paul eventually got to Rome, but he arrived under arrest, was confined to prison, and eventually executed.

When our dreams are shattered like this, King says, we are tempted to give up, but that is not the answer. “The answer,” King writes, “lies in our willing acceptance of unwanted and unfortunate circumstances even as we cling to a radiant hope.” He asks himself, his congregation, and us this question: how can we turn the liability of what we are suffering (personally or as a community) into an asset? He finds his answer in the witness of his own foreparents: “In spite of the inexpressible cruelties [of slavery], our foreparents survived.... [T]hese courageous men and women dreamed of the brighter day. They had no alternative except to accept the fact of slavery, but they clung tenaciously to the hope of freedom.... Their bottomless vitality transformed the darkness of frustration into the light of hope.” (*Strength to Love*, pp. 90, 92-93).

A desperately sick woman nevertheless kept hope alive. Jesus said to her, “Daughter, your faith has saved you. You entrusted yourself to God and to me; now take your life back.”