

Lectionary 13

July 1, 2018

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Mark. (Mark 5: 21-43)

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. 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 hemorrhages 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 hemorrhage 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 around 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 Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today Mark tells us a long, complex, and very rich story. There is so much in this story – it is one of my all-time favorites – we could spend days immersed in it. But today I want to focus on one line: "*Do not fear, only believe.*" "*Do not fear, only believe.*" Fear and faith. We could just sit here for twenty minutes and meditate on that phrase, just pray on that line. Don't worry; we're not going to.

But I will invite you to take those words with you this week and pray them, and let them shape you. Let them inform what you see in the world all week. But, in the meantime, I would like to take those words, “*Do not fear, only believe,*” and think about: what does it look like to believe fearlessly? What does it look like to trust beyond fear, to keep on trusting? In a world that goes straight to fear, to worse case scenarios, what does it look like to trust in the living God?

As we wonder about that, I would like to see what we can learn from three of the characters in this story: the little girl, the father, and the woman who interrupts. Let’s take a look at them, and we’re going to start with the little girl. The little girl, Jairus’ daughter.

What do we know about Jairus’ daughter? She is twelve. We know she’s twelve. We know she’s sick. We know she has a mom and dad who are crazy-worried about her. Her dad is well off, so she has what would be the best medical care that you can get in First Century Capernaum, which is pretty much none.

What you may not know is what it’s like to be a sick child in the First Century. And to think about that, I need ten volunteers. They don’t have to say anything. They just have to stand up. So, let’s go with JoAnn. You, two, three, four five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, stand up. Okay. We are going to pretend that this is the entire population of Capernaum in the First Century. It was only about fifteen hundred people, but we’re going to just go with these ten. Okay. So I am going to ask you three to sit down. Thirty percent of children born in those days did not make it to age six. Thirty percent; three. You three can sit down. Sixty per cent of children born in those days did not make it to age fifteen. Sixty percent did not live to age fifteen. Two more. Seventy-five percent of people born do not make it to age twenty-five. Seventy-five percent of the population is dead by age twenty-five. One more. Ninety percent of the population does not make it to age forty-five. And you can sit down, JoAnn. Ninety-seven percent of the population doesn’t make it to age sixty.¹ It makes me an anomaly, many of you an anomaly.

Remember that this is before vaccinations, before prenatal care, before awareness of germs, before antibiotics. The population is always underfed, and war is a constant. So death becomes an everyday occurrence. If sixty percent of the population died before age fifteen, it’s not unusual for a twelve-year old girl to be dying. Most of her peers have already died. In this culture, this little girl is middle aged. Dying is normal, even when you’re twelve. But this girl’s dad is not willing to accept that.

And so we learn the first lesson of faith. Faith challenges the status quo. Faith envisions something more. Faith looks at the world like it is right now and says, “That is not good enough. God wants more for God’s people than sixty percent dying at age fifteen.” “I’m going to live as if something else can be true. I can see something better.

¹ Bruce Malina; Richard L. Rohrbaugh. Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (p. 211). Kindle Edition.

I will work for something better.” Faith has a vision that it lives toward. What is the vision that your faith sees right now?

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “I have a dream that one day my children will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Millard Fuller imagined a world where everyone had a home, and he established Habitat for Humanity. Me Too, Black Lives Matter, Pride, all envision a more inclusive world, a world where others are honored. Faith sees beyond what is happening right now to what could be, and lives in that place.

Jairus saw a world where twelve-year olds didn’t have to die young, and he went for it. *“Do not fear, only believe.”* And speaking of Jairus, character number two, his name means, “God will enlighten.” How’s that for a metaphoric name?

And what do we know about Jairus?

RESPONSE: A leader.

He is a leader in the synagogue. And remember this is a theocracy, which means he was also a civic leader, kind of like a city council leader. He was probably wealthy, if he was a civic leader, so he had resources. He was well known, he was respected; he had some power and privilege.

And there he is, falling at Jesus’ feet, begging to be noticed by this peasant healer. It’s the CEO begging to be noticed by the summer intern. He is bowing down, publicly claiming, “I am inferior to you.” He is all in. If Jesus doesn’t heal this girl, Jairus has not only lost his daughter, but he has lost all credibility. He is staking his future on Jesus. He is open, and vulnerable, and at risk.

But could Jairus ever expect what would come next? Jesus agrees to come. They’re on the way. They’re going to make it. But then Jesus stops. He gets distracted. He starts talking to this woman. “My daughter is dying!” You can just feel the anxiety rise. “Come on, Jesus, get on with it. We’ve got to get there!” And then the word comes, “Your daughter is dead.”

Faith was never more vulnerable. Jairus could not heal his daughter. He couldn’t make Jesus hurry. He couldn’t fix this. He was totally dependent on something outside of himself. Faith can’t control God. Faith can’t make God do what we want, how we want it done. We do what we can. But then we have to trust in God’s promises. The life of faith twists and turns, and we can’t always see clear to the end. *“Do not fear, only believe.”*

And then there is this woman. What do we know about this woman? Do you remember her name? “A woman.” She has no name. She is anonymous, unseen, unknown, with hidden suffering. Suffering as long as the little girl had been alive. Twelve years. She, too, is desperate. How could she find healing? She has no standing. She has no one to champion for her. She has no money. Like many who live

in poverty today, she is desperate, and there is no way for her to get healing. How can she even be noticed and not shooed away as unfit or unqualified?

She comes up with a brazen idea. "Maybe if I touch him, I'll be healed." She pushes her way through the crowd, determined to take what has not been offered. Determined to steal her healing, if she must. One touch. And this. Her body is whole. She stands frozen, afraid to believe that this could be true.

Then Jesus stops as well and says, "Who touched me?" And she is given a dreadful choice. She could say nothing. She can go home, and in a week or so say one of the cures she tried has made all the difference. Quietly live out her life in peace, and no one will know. That's one choice.

The other is to bravely tell the truth. To tell the truth that she ignored the mandate against a woman touching a man. That she ignored the laws about the sick being isolated. That she took what was not hers to take. No exceptions, no permissions.

She could have gone away silent. But faith is bold. Faith speaks the truth about what God is doing in the world. Faith witnesses to the mighty acts of God in our own lives. She came in fear and trembling, but she came, fell down before him, and told him, quote, "the whole truth." "*Do not fear, only believe.*" Believe that you, too, have a true story to tell.

What truth do you have to tell? What has God given you in this life? How has God healed you, or challenged you, or given you new life? What can you boldly tell? You know, it's because this woman came in fear and trembling and told the whole truth, that for two thousand years those who are isolated, and hurting, and fearful, they have had a champion. They can say, "Jesus healed her. Jesus called her daughter. Jesus said she had faith. And so I'm going to reach out as well." Others can hope, because she boldly told the truth.

"*Do not fear, only believe.*" These men and women from the pages of the Bible remind us that, number one, faith doesn't leave things alone. It envisions something better. It envisions a different way and lives toward that. Number two, faith does not put us in control. We must be willing to let God lead us on a winding path, when all we can see are the promises. And, number three, faith is bold and willing to bravely tell the truth, so that others can know the amazing, loving God, who heals us, and raises us up, and makes us whole.

"*Do not fear, only believe.*" Let these be the words that shape us this week.

Amen.