

July 1, 2018
6th Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 5:21-43
The Rev. Carenda Baker

As we've been following Jesus in Mark's gospel, Mark shows us Jesus is a man of action, a man "on the move". Last week we heard about his calming a storm as he and the disciples traveled from the Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee to the "other" side, the Gentile side. Jesus had been teaching and healing on one side and after the storm was calmed, he healed on the "other" side, too. There on the Gentile side, he drove demons out of a man living among the tombs, and sent the demons into a herd of pigs. His healing was gratefully received by the formerly demon-possessed man. But the townspeople there were less sure about it. They begged Jesus to leave their neighborhood.

While they may not have liked a man who was demon possessed, at least they knew what to expect from him. Jesus' acts of healing up-end the way the world is supposed to be, and that is threatening to some. No, not everyone was excited about Jesus' acts of healing. After Jesus is asked to leave the neighborhood, he does so, and heads back across the Sea of Galilee. He walks ashore to find throngs of people waiting for him. Word had gotten around about Jesus' power to heal, so more and more folks were seeking him out, in hopes of finding cure for their ailments.

Today's gospel reading gives us a healing story "sandwich", if you will, a story tucked within another story. The man Jairus, a leader of the synagogue comes to Jesus breathless and desperate. Despite the man's gender, position and status, despite his power, prestige, and privilege, he has been reduced to the painful impotence every parent feels when a beloved child is ill. Jairus will do anything, whatever it takes, including bowing down and begging Jesus for help so that his little girl, twelve years old and near death, will be saved.

On his way to see Jairus' daughter, an unnamed woman has slipped into the crowd thronging around Jesus. She has been sick for twelve years, as long as Jairus' daughter has been alive. The woman has been suffering with hemorrhages. The threads of her hope are frayed paper thin. She is tired, plumb worn out. For twelve years she has made visits to doctor after doctor, asking them for help. Not only has she not been helped - her condition has gotten worse. With no health insurance, no social safety net, whatever her resources were, they've been exhausted. There is no mention of a husband, family or friends, so we are left to wonder how in the world she has been existing. Her status as "chronically and incurably ill" has likely left her on the margins of life socially, emotionally, financially.

Somehow, she's heard about him. Someone has told her about Jesus. She has been ill for a long time. Maybe the person who told her about Jesus knew all about her condition, or maybe not. Sometimes our need for healing is visible, and

obvious, like Jairus' daughter near death. Sometimes the need for healing is hidden and private, like this woman suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years.

Because someone had told her about Jesus, the faint ember of hope within her had been rekindled. She had nothing to lose. Why not see if she could get just close enough to lightly brush up against him?

She came up from behind him, reached out and touched his cloak, with the desire and intent to be healed. And it worked.

Immediately aware that power had left him, Jesus looked around the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" The disciples said, "Are you serious, Jesus? Who didn't touch your clothes? You're kind of a big deal here and in the middle of a pretty big crowd."

But Jesus keeps looking around at the crowd. And the healed woman knows that Jesus knows. She pushes forward, nudging people out of her way and falls at Jesus' feet. There, she tells him the whole truth.

Mark doesn't tell us what she said.

Maybe she spoke of the terrible isolation that came with her illness. Or the desperation of seeking help, only to have her hopes dashed again and again, and her condition actually getting worse.

Maybe she told him she felt guilty for being in need of healing – as if her ailment was somehow her fault, because of something she had done.

Maybe she admitted she couldn't save herself, and that others couldn't heal her either. She was desperate. She needed healing that only God could provide. Maybe she told Jesus what she had heard about him from someone else. And now, right before him, she could acknowledge - *HE* was the Whole Truth.

Her action was dangerous and empowering at the same time. And a big part of the healing was being able to pour out and speak her whole truth to Jesus.

"Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your disease".

And in the time Jesus was talking to the woman, Jairus receives word that his daughter is dead. Jesus then leaves the daughter who, from amidst the crowd, had touched his cloak and heads off to see the other daughter, the twelve year old. He takes her by the hand and tells her to get up, and reminds her parents to give her something to eat.

Two stories of healing, renewal, and restored life. This is a glimpse of the huge re-ordering of the world. This is a new thing. This is what God's kingdom coming looks like.

Why does Mark tell this story? Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor says Mark's purpose is to establish Jesus' identity. These stories tell us "who God is, and how God acts, and what God is like".

Mark is saying, “This man *is* the son of God. Believe it.” The Son of God has power over illness and death. Holding on to that knowledge would sustain Mark’s community when things got tough, which they did. Knowing Jesus’ identity and power would give Mark’s community and all of us, the Church, “strength to meet the days to come and the courage and hope to not lose heart.” [Barbara Taylor Brown, “One Step at a Time” in *The Preaching Life*.]

Many conditions and situations in life can immobilize us – depression, physical illness, anxiety, witnessing the suffering of others, losing faith in the people and institutions which provide structure and safety for our communities and our nation.

To be human is to be vulnerable – to live with uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure. It’s hard and it’s scary. We feel naked when we’re vulnerable. But to allow ourselves to be vulnerable means we can let ourselves feel, and we can admit that there are limitations to being human. None of us is going to live forever in this world. We are not in control, will never be in control of everything that happens. I have been praying with more frequency in recent months that prayer used in many twelve-step groups – “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference”.

When it comes to vulnerability – our given human condition - there are two especially dangerous myths we need to remember and guard against. The first is that vulnerability equals weakness. This is a false and incorrect equation.

Dr. Brene Brown asserts in her book, *Daring Greatly*, “Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage”. She shares her prayer of preparation before giving a presentation to an audience is - “Give me the courage to show up and let myself be seen.” Vulnerability is one of the things that gives life meaning. And there cannot be love without vulnerability.

The second deadly myth that gets us tremendously off track is the belief that “we can go it alone.” This belief is woven into our DNA as Americans. We are taught to believe it, but that does not make it true. Many even admire and aspire to the notion that we can “go it alone”. But no person, no family, community, or nation can “go it alone”. This thinking goes against our spiritual DNA. God lives in a communion of three persons – the Trinity. We have been created for community with God and each other, and with the whole created world.

Why do we resist asking for help? Why is it so hard to admit that we need each other? At the top of the list is that we don’t want to appear weak. “Needy”. Dependent. Less than competent. Not having it “all together”. Our pride and how we’ll be perceived by others swallow us up – “I shouldn’t need to ask for help. I should be able to take care of this on my own”. Shame. Fear of being laughed at, made fun of. Uncertainty - the help we need might not be immediately forthcoming. What if there is no one who *can* help us?

Especially in the gospel stories of Jesus' healing ministry, Jesus shows how God sees vulnerability. God is good, attentive, and compassionate. God notices and cares. God is willing to be interrupted by our needs. Though we may feel weak and helpless in the face of it, God has power over illness and death. God's work is the work of healing, renewal, restoration and resurrection – bringing life where it looks like no life is possible. And, there is enough time, power, compassion, and grace to go around so that *no one* needs to be written off. All Scripture is unequivocal on this: God is clearly and emphatically on the side of the vulnerable.

Michael Lindvall tells about a friend of his, a man of deep faith who was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease when he was still in his 50's. He and his wife prayed that he might be healed. Twenty years later, he is in the last debilitating stages of the disease. Nevertheless, his friend once told Lindvall that his prayers had been answered. He said in all sincerity, "I have been healed, not of Parkinson's disease, but I have been healed of my fear of Parkinson's disease." When healing does not come in the way we had hoped and prayed it would, Lindvall reflects: "It may be helpful to remember that prayers for healing are not simply utilitarian. Prayers for healing are not simply a matter of bending God's will toward my will, my hopes, my needs. To ask something of God is to edge into deeper relationship with God." [*Feasting on the Word, Year B*].

It is the touch, the encounter with Jesus, with God that is most important when we bring our needs and the needs of others to God. To ask something of God is to brush up against grace, like the woman who knew she needed just the slightest touch of the hem of Jesus' garment to be made well. Healing grace is always available. And there is always more than enough offered to anyone who has the courage to reach out and ask for it.

We have opportunities today to "brush up against God's grace". In healing prayers and anointing with oil. In recalling God's story - our story re-told in the Prayer of Great Thanksgiving. In holding out our hands to receive and be touched again by Jesus in bread and cup. All these are gracious invitations for us to exercise "the courage to show up and let ourselves be seen by God", to brush up against grace. Offered at the time of prayers for healing, this prayer is for all of us: "The Almighty Lord, who is a strong tower to all who put their trust in him, to whom all things in heaven, on earth and under the earth bow and obey; Be now and evermore your defense, and make you know and feel that the only Name under heaven given for health and salvation is the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen."