

“The Church as...a Healing Place”

Valley Presbyterian Church – June 28, 2009

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 5:21-43

Rev. John Wahl

A couple of weeks ago, we heard Jesus use parables about seeds and plants to teach about the kingdom of God. Through the church and its ministry, the seeds that are planted would grow by God’s goodness to produce a miraculous harvest. And In this future realm of the Kingdom, the role of the church would be to offer shade and shelter, hope and encouragement, to anyone in need.

Last week, we looked at the story of Jesus crossing the stormy sea on a boat with his disciples. By going through this ordeal together, the disciples realized that Jesus was and always would be with him. Jesus had both the power to calm the wind and the waves as well as to calm the fear in their hearts. And so, by having faith in him, the church in any age can navigate through life’s stormy waters, confident that Jesus will always be present and that they will be led safely through to the other side.

This morning, we read about a different side of Jesus. We see in these stories the ways that Jesus can be a healer, and how those in need of healing might respond either with faith or with fear. In this reading, Jesus allows himself to be interrupted – to stop and find the woman who reached out her hand to touch his robe – even at the risk of being too late to help the young girl who has fallen ill. But, in the end, we realize that it is never too late if only we can face our fears and put our trust in Jesus.

Both of the stories we heard this morning involve women in the ultimate forms of crisis; facing the greatest of human existential fears: ostracism and death. We are not told their names but instead know them by their unfortunate situations: as the bleeding woman and the dead girl. Of course, it was not always this way: both are daughters of Abraham, not outsiders to begin with, but individuals who have fallen victim to the restrictions of the Jewish faith. Now, both are unfit to be touched – because of blood and death – at the risk of passing on their uncleanness to others. It might have been okay if the woman had brushed against Jesus with an accidental touch, or if the girl had really just been sleeping, but instead Jesus – and anyone else who would touch these two women – are in danger of being made unclean themselves.

The only person – beyond Jesus and his disciples – that is actually named in this story is Jairus, the Temple leader, whose name means “he who is awakened” or “he has been enlightened.”¹ And yet, it is not this powerful, respected man in the community who is awakened, but his powerless, sick little girl and – even before that – a powerless, ailing woman. And yet, by putting his trust in Jesus and not giving up hope that his ailing daughter might be healed - despite the delays and the bad news along the way – the faith

¹ Mark Edington in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 3

of Jairus awakens. In the end, it is not his position of power that allows him to trust, but his humility. Desperate to help his daughter, he puts his trust in Jesus and does not lose faith, even when things do not seem to be working out the way he had planned.

“Do not fear, only believe,” Jesus says reassuringly to Jairus, after messengers arrive with the news that his daughter has died. In recording these words – and the miraculous awakening from the dead which was witnessed by only a few select people – Mark makes sure that the words were not only for the benefit of Jairus, but for the entire early church; and not only for those in the early church, but for all who place their trust in Jesus – for “all of us who suffer from the human condition, who are up against things we cannot control.”² “Do not fear,” Jesus says, “only believe.”

Where is the church in these stories? Certainly, there are people who follow Jesus: sometimes in large crowds, sometimes only a few disciples. There is healing and new life. There is hope and faith which overcomes fear and despair. There is mourning, followed by rejoicing. There are interrupted plans and unplanned delays. There is bad news, but it can't overshadow the good news.

But, where is the church? Where are the building, the traditions, and the religious institution? If the church is to be a healing place, what can be learned from these stories of two women being healed in the villages, on the road, in the home?

The stories take place in these settings not only because Jesus happens to be there, but because that is where the people who need Jesus are. These two women – the twelve year old girl and the woman with the twelve-year old ailment – symbolize everyone who has been shut out from hope, from healing, and from the acceptable standards of society. In those days, religion took place in designated places, among those who were designated as being pure and clean. The authorities would not allow their holy places to be defiled or for their faithful adherents to become blemished. Therefore, they checked who came in the door to keep those who were unclean on the outside, and when they came in to a holy place, they washed their hands to rinse off any residue of the outside world. But, Jesus refuses to keep himself separate from those who are declared unclean by religious authorities. He travels among them and offers himself to anyone who allows themselves to hope in the healing that he could provide.

But in order to have the healing that Jesus provides, it is first necessary to let go of the certainty that we know what form that healing will take. Somehow, we must move from fear to faith.

My brother and his wife thought they were ready. They had already named the baby, they had finished decorating the room. But after they lost baby Sarah full-term, only ten days before the due date, they didn't think it was possible to heal. I flew down to Atlanta to offer them support, I went with them to pick out the casket and the burial plot, I cried with them and prayed with them, but then I had to go home. What I could offer them may have been some help, but it was their church that got them through it.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, as quoted by Kate Huey in “Weekly Seeds”

The friends in their Sunday School class, the church counselor who met with them each week, the many ways they were consoled and encouraged, the ways that the scriptures were revealed to them as a source of comfort. It was the people of their church who showed them that they were loved, that Jesus loved them, that God wanted healing for them, in body and mind and spirit.

The church has been, can be and already is a healing place for countless numbers of people. And yet, for so many others – those outside the church, those who live on the periphery of the church, those who have left the church – their fear holds them back from faith. How can the doors of the healing place be opened? How can we – as members of the church – demonstrate the love and compassion that Jesus had for these two women? These stories of healing in Mark’s gospel show that our prayers for healing – whether they are for our own pain or for the pain of others – often do not lead to the outcomes that we might hope or expect. Jesus is revealed through the church when God’s power is not limited to our expectations. When we worship God, it is not for our gain, but for God’s glory. The greatest antidote to our fear, our pain, our insecurity, is a deeper relationship with God. As the church, we can reveal how God has touched us; moved us; changed us. And in these two stories, the women are healed by touch. One of them touches Jesus, while the other is touched by Jesus. In spite of all the reasons they could be viewed as untouchable, they were healed through touch.

Sometimes, we get seduced by the idea that seemingly everyone we read about in these stories is restored to physical health. It causes us to wonder why these two women are so lucky when so many others are not. While we hope and pray for help and healing – whether physical or emotional – sometimes it does not seem to happen. As Christians, as a church, we don’t always get what we want. But, if we are Christians, and if we are in the church, then we can receive the healing power that God has to give us, and live out God’s calling for our lives as participants in that healing. “Do not fear,” Jesus could say, even to that desperate, grieving father, “only believe.”

There are some among who are either brave or faithful or desperate enough to reach out their hands and seek God’s healing touch. As the church, can we recognize them even if they reach out silently? Can we embrace them even if they are different; or if there doesn’t seem to be any cure for their ailments?

But there are others as well: others who, like the daughter of Jairus, have no voice to communicate their need to be touched. As the church, can we reach out to them; can we offer them the hope that they can be awakened by Jesus; that he has the power to heal them through a deeper relationship to God? Will we seek out Jesus on their behalf; and have faith that beyond even the bad news lies the hope of the good news?

The church is a healing place, and yet so many people in so many places are in need of so many kinds of healing. Can we, as a church, follow the path of our Lord Jesus Christ, and bring the miracle of God’s healing power into our villages and our homes? May we become the church...as a healing place; both here and wherever God might call us to go. AMEN.