

6 Pentecost, Proper 8, Yr.B
July 1, 2018
Mark 5:21-43

You may remember when I returned from vacation and said that, at a certain point I asked Jane, who was then in the passenger seat, to make some notes about what we seeing, to be used in future sermons. Well, here's one of them, which I'm sure you've also seen: there are two signs along the road, once you get into the mountains, one of which says, CHAIN UP AREA and the other, as you might guess, CHAIN REMOVAL AREA. If you think about those as metaphors, you can think all about the ways we can get chained up, entangled, in stuff that keeps us from being those people God intended us to be. Sometimes we seem to put on the chains ourselves – with things like drug or alcohol addictions, or guilt or resentment that we can't rid ourselves of; sometimes others load the chains on, say with unreasonable expectations; or sometimes society's rules become chains, with conventions that tell us who we can be, or whether we're acceptable. Witness the current debacle at the border as an example of the latter. One way of looking at Mark's gospel is to see it as a discussion of fear; fear that chains us up and the chain removal that's possible through faith in Christ.

Let's look at the text. Mark sometimes uses a technique called intercalation, also called, more descriptively, a Markan sandwich, in which he sandwiches two stories together, playing them off against one another to make his point. That's what we have this morning. The reading starts with Jairus, the leader of the local synagogue, coming to Jesus and begging him to save his beloved daughter's life.

"Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live," he says. So Jesus agrees and they all start off to Jairus' house. The text also says that they're surrounded by a great crowd. And in that crowd is a woman, the one who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. A word here about that. Jewish faith and practice thought that blood was the life force of a being. So blood was precious but also dangerous. And more importantly for this story, this flow of blood would have made the woman ritually (not morally) impure. And that ritual impurity would have required isolation during the period of the blood flow. In her case, since it had been going on for twelve years, it was nothing short of catastrophic – it would have meant total social isolation. The law required that no one could touch something she had touched, or sit where she had sat. And she would also have been required to make sure she didn't touch anyone or anything that another person would be using. She would have been, by this time, a social pariah. In many ways, her life was over – her condition was a disaster. Mark points at this when he says that she'd tried everything and had spent all her money on doctors to cure the condition. Nothing had worked.

Because he puts them together, Mark undoubtedly wants us to compare and contrast these two stories. The woman and Jairus' daughter have some things in common. They're both female, they share the number twelve, they're both in dire situations and they're both ritually unclean. The woman, as I mentioned, because of the flow of blood and the little girl because she's dead. Both pictures are of desperation; so much so that those involved are willing to try anything – to go beyond their fear, or reticence, or the normal societal definitions of power and status – both trying to reach Jesus in the hope of healing.

But there are relevant differences as well. The little girl, Jairus' daughter, is cherished and protected. She lives in a family that has status and power because of Jairus' position. The woman, though, is completely alone, without an advocate or male protector, which makes her vulnerable in this society. She's also poor; and she's powerless.

Jairus and the woman have some things in common, too. They are both suffering and they're both desperate. And that means that they are both willing to do whatever they can for healing. Somehow they've both heard about Jesus. Perhaps they had heard that he was a man like no other man. The woman is risking social exposure, which she tries to minimize by approaching Jesus in the crowd. She comes up behind him; she's not going to risk approaching him directly, partly because the nature of her affliction would have been considered shameful. So, she thinks, "if I can just touch his clothing....that'll do it. I'll be made well and no one will need to know." And so she does. But as luck would have it, Jesus feels "that the power had gone forth from him," and turns to find out who touched him. The disciples, who in Mark, are often a bumbling bunch, respond by saying something like, "Good grief, what do you mean who touched you? Look at this crowd for Pete's sake!" And so the woman comes forward and tells him the whole truth. The text says she did so in "fear and trembling" which seems odd until you remember that she would have made HIM, a RABBI no less, ritually impure by touching him. When I picture this, it seems like everyone must have been holding their breath, waiting to see how Jesus would respond – anger? Condemnation? But no – he responds by calling her "daughter" the only time scripture records him saying this to anyone. "Daughter," he says, giving her the same status as Jairus' daughter, because they both are children of God. DAUGHTER, GO IN PEACE. This woman, who had been a non-person, the one who was outcast and invisible, is reminded that she, too, is beloved of God.

What about Jairus? What was he risking? In the honor and shame society they lived in, he, too, was risking a lot. I don't think it's a stretch to say that, because of his position at the synagogue, he'd heard some pretty negative stuff about Jesus - that he was a dangerous heretic, an enemy of the scribes and Pharisees, that he was someone they needed to get rid of. So Jairus had to leave a lot behind – certainly his dignity and pride as he kneels in the dust before this itinerant preacher and begs him to come to his home and lay hands on his daughter, but also his prejudices, his social standing within his community, his credibility – he's willing to lay that all down in the hope that his daughter will be saved. One thing to note here, and I think we've all had this experience, that, when we're at a crisis point, some life-or-death point, all the stuff that's really superfluous falls away and we simply re-order our priorities. We know what's most important.

Hold on to all that for a moment and go back to the first reading, which says that God does not delight in the death of the living. Our God is a God of life, abundant life. And as Christians, perhaps we could say that our central belief is that when we look at Jesus we see God. So, when we look at Jesus, it's clear how we're supposed to live – always on the side of LIFE. To go back to my original metaphor, that means always on the side of chain removal wherever we find them. And I wonder if very often those chains don't have to do with fear – last week we heard about the disciples being afraid of perishing in the storm; this week it was Jairus' fear of losing his daughter and the nameless woman's fear of a living death. When I was in Madison

for Joe's graduation, I was taken with how many of the student speakers' comments had to do with fear and overcoming that fear. Maybe we all need to hear Jesus' words to Jairus: DO NOT FEAR ONLY BELIEVE. Believe that you are God's beloved son or daughter. Believe that you matter infinitely. Believe that that love is yours just because you exist. Believe that you can look at everyone else and see THEIR belovedness and in so doing, remove their chains and give them new life.

A final word. Because Wednesday is the 4th of July, I was re-reading the Declaration of Independence, which sets out a vision of America that we are still working to achieve. When Lincoln was preparing to free the slaves, it was the Declaration upon which he based his action. Neither the authors of the Declaration nor Lincoln thought that their actions would be easy. But in the final paragraph of the Declaration they state what they are relying upon and what they are willing to give up: "...with firm reliance on divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor. Chain-breaking is never easy, but it's always blessed.

Amen.