Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

July 1, 2018

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“THE FIRST SHALL BE LAST” Mark 5:21-43

Our scripture reading for today from the Gospel of Mark has often been referred to as “The Raising of the Daughter of Jairus.” That is misleading, because the heart of the story is not the story about Jairus and his daughter but the story of the woman who was healed from her twelve-year history of hemorrhaging. And so what we have here is a story within a story and it is the inner story that informs the outer story.

When considering the entire story, there are a few things to keep in mind. For one thing, there is the use of the number “twelve.” The woman has been suffering for twelve years; the daughter of Jairus is twelve years old. The number “twelve” serves to tell us that there is a connection between the two stories, and that we need to see them as belonging together.

In hearing the whole of the story, both the story of Jairus’s daughter and the woman who sought healing, we need to keep in mind the theme of religious purity. Jesus violates the purity code when he touches the hand of the dead girl. The religious purity system did not allow any direct touching of a dead body. To touch a dead body made one impure for seven days. When we turn to the story of the woman who sought healing for herself, she defies the laws of religious purity when she touches the cloak of Jesus because her bleeding had made her continuously and ritually unclean. In truth, much of her suffering was caused by the fact that her history of hemorrhaging had shut her out of the religious and communal life of her surroundings. She was, in a real sense, a victim of the purity code that dominated the religious practices of her tradition. She was a victim not only religiously but also economically. We read, “She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.” (Mk 5:26)

In the entire story, both the inner and the outer story, there are many contrasts to be found. Jairus, the leader of the synagogue has a name; the woman is nameless. It is a nameless woman that interrupts the healing of the daughter of the named leader. In the ministry of Jesus, more often than not, the needs of the unnamed poor take precedence over the needs of the named and the established.

As we hear the story, it is also helpful to pay attention to the role of the crowd, which includes the disciples. They just don’t get it. The disciples do not want to be bothered by the desire of Jesus to know who touched him, so intent are they to get back to the healing of Jairus’s daughter. But Jesus has felt power leave his body, and he knows that something significant has happened. Because he does not let the matter drop, the woman, now healed, is led to reveal herself and the truth of her life. Later, at the home of Jairus, the disbelieving crowd does not think it possible that Jesus can bring forth life from death. When Jesus suggests that the girl is sleeping rather than dead, they laugh at him. Does Mark want us, as readers of the story to question whether or not we would find themselves in the disbelieving crowd and among the disciples who have not yet learned anything about the way of faith? Perhaps.

This story is first and foremost a story about faith, the faith of an unnamed woman who believes that she will be made well if she but touches the clothes of Jesus. What can her story teach us?

Let me mention three things. First, the story reminds us that we who are trying to be faithful might want to open ourselves up to the faith stories of others. Recall that when Jairus received word that his daughter had died, it was the kind of faith the woman had that Jesus had in mind when he says to him, “Do not fear, only believe.” We, like Jairus, can be so caught up in our own lack of faith that we fail to take note of others who can teach us the way of faith. And then, if we do look to others, we tend think of those whose names are well known to us. We think of a Mother Theresa, or a Martin Luther King, or a Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Our story from Mark’s Gospel causes us to look in a different direction, to those who are not the named leaders of the faith, but to those whose quiet acts of courage and faith may not be as obvious. It is the unnamed woman who teaches Jairus and the disciples all about faith.

One of the privileges of being your interim pastor is to come to know each of you, your stories, and the depth of your faith. And believe me, you are surrounded by those who can teach you about faith. They may not be the named leaders of the congregation, but their lives are living testimonies to the way of faith. This is why it is so important that we make opportunities available for people to share their faith journeys. The stories of each can

enrich the lives of all. We do indeed learn about the way of faith from the faith of others.

In the second place, our story teaches us that faith may well lead us to do the bold and courageous thing. The woman who had experienced hemorrhaging for twelve years had a choice. She could have simply accepted her lot in life. But her faith would not allow her to do that. Quite to the contrary, her faith led to boldness. To touch the cloak of Jesus, she had to do something that was not easy to do, and this she did, not once but twice. The first time she reached out to touch the cloak of Jesus. The second time, out of the crowd, she revealed herself at the request of Jesus. She came forward to Jesus “full of fear and trembling” and “fell down before him and told him the whole truth.” Faith caused the woman to be courageous in her action and in her witness.

The longer I observe American Christianity the more discouraged I am tempted to become. It is a Christianity that all too often blends into the crowd, and also the culture that surrounds it. Except for a few Christians here and there, and a few congregations here and there, prophetic voices are rare these days. Most Christian pastors would never think to speak out against injustice. Either they are afraid, or do not think that their voice would make a difference. Perhaps it is because most Christians, influenced by the culture wars raging in our society, seem to think that Christianity has to do more with issues of personal morality (especially sexual morality) than it does with issues of war and peace, wealth and poverty. But Jesus spoke of wealth and poverty more than any other subject. It is often even difficult to interest Christians in issues of environmental justice and preservation.

Yet, our story seems to say that authentic faith will lead us to do the courageous, bold thing. Thank God there are those who still do just that. May we be among them.

Finally, the story of the woman who sought healing from Jesus sets the stage for something Jesus will say over and over again in so many ways, “The first shall be last and the last shall be first.” The faith of the unnamed, anonymous woman of our story teaches Jairus, the prominent named leader of the synagogue, what he must do. She is the last who is first in God’s kingdom, and Jairus is the first who is last. It is not until Jesus first heals the woman that he will then turn to the need of Jairus. He will turn to the needs of both, but the order is very important. The woman comes first and Jairus comes second.

I really do believe that most of us who are already in the Christian fold are really like Jairus. We are first, and God surely does not ignore our needs. But let us realize that until the needs of the last, the least among us—the poor and hungry and homeless and unloved—are first met, then we may just have to wait. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. This is the truth that has led Christians to serve the least of the sisters and brothers before their own needs. Last Wednesday at our Lectionary Study Group we talked about Kalaupapa and how Christians such as Mother Alice, Father Damien and Sister Marianne Cope interrupted their lives to serve those with leprosy.

We who are already in the fold, so to speak, are called to put the needs of the least of the brothers and sisters before our own needs. This is why we who have already been brought into God’s grace must be makers of peace and doers of love and justice in our world. For, in a sense, our salvation depends upon the salvation and wellbeing of all. None of us can be truly free until all are free. The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

Today, we give thanks today for this wonderful and rich story from the Gospel of Mark. May it continue to teach us about ourselves and about the healing and restoration that God desires for all of her children. Amen.