FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

June 27, 2021

*“Alternate Trajectories”*

Mark 5:21-43

One of the first things we have all noticed about the passage has just been read is that there is more than one story being told. We have the story of Jairus and his daughter, and we have the story of an unnamed woman.

After spending so much time during this month on Mark and the way he records some of Jesus’ parables, I found myself hearing this morning’s stories as yet another example of the odd, but wonderful account of Jesus and his penchant for parables.

What I mean is that, on the surface of things, we have two miracle stories. The first is about a woman who has been sick with a disease that none of the doctors she has seen has been able to help her with. *She* is cured instantly by simply touching Jesus’ garment. She did not have to speak to him. *He* did not have to see *her* at all.

In the second story, Jairus’ daughter is pronounced dead before Jesus can get to her. Yet, all he has to do is put his hand out to her, and that is enough for her to rise – whole and healthy – and *alive* once again.

These two stories, just as they are, are amazing and filled with hope and joy for all who hear them – even you and me all these centuries later. They are stories of the way in which three people experience a complete change in their lives through their faith, and Jesus’ great and powerful love. They experience a reversal of the trajectory, or path, their lives had been on.

For the unnamed woman, it meant leaving her twelve-year-long journey of suffering, disappointment and destitution. For Jairus, it meant leaving behind the brief but harrowing journey into worry and grief. For his daughter, it meant new life!

For we who read and hear these stories proclaimed, we are meant to rejoice and be strengthened by these two wonderful outcomes, but like the parables, there is even more to these stories than what immediately meets the eye. And we are supposed to ferret-out *that* message, too, because it is in the indirect, second message in *that* message that may we encounter a healing and a reconciliation that is even deeper than the first.

To begin again: the passage we heard begins with Jesus being confronted by a leader of the Jewish community, the leader of the synagogue itself. Most of us probably hear this as the story of a distraught father seeking healing for his sick child. While this is correct, what we must add to our hearing of this story is just how unusual it would be for such a man to humble himself before anyone, even Jesus. Unlike us, the first people who heard this story would have been deeply surprised and impressed.

For this man with as much status and position as Jairus had in his community, the normal trajectory would have been for him to *send* for Jesus. Indeed, it would have been rare for him to have given an iterant rabbi any notice or confidence at all. In fact, in order for Jairus to go to Jesus, he had to first break with his own sense of importance in order to humble himself. *Then* he would have had to break with other religious officials (like himself) who were already plotting to destroy Jesus and his movement.

What Jairus knew is: that for all of his power and wealth, there is nothing he could do to save his child. Only a power greater than his own could do that. Jairus was able to recognize and accept the real power of God’s love, which was incarnated in this person named Jesus.

So, what Jairus learned is that because of the love he has been shown, his life and his daughter’s life is set upon a new course – perhaps a new sense of humility, and a new sense of relatedness to other people.

In the other story of the unnamed woman: what I would like us to contemplate is just how horrified the first people who heard this story would have been at this *diseased* woman without any wealth or standing in the community.

Mark says that she had spent all she had on cures that did not work. This was not uncommon in that place and time. The poor were often victimized in this way too. They had little money to spend on anything other that home remedies. When they did gather the cash to do so, they were often preyed upon by fake healers who took their money but left them as sick as they had been. This woman had once had enough money to spend on many healers. Nothing had worked.

As most of us know: to have the kind of sickness she had – the bleeding – this meant that she was also considered unclean; that is unfit to take part in the regular interaction with family and friends. It is worth mentioning that *only women* could be judged in this manner because only women can have this particular kind of illness.

To re-enter her life among people she would not only need to be cured, her cure would have to be approved by a priest before she could take her place again in the community.

This woman was poor and unclean. The first people who heard this story would have been scandalized by the though of this outcast woman sneaking into a whole crowd of healthy, “respectable” people to do what she did. Even her desperation would not have been enough for them to have willingly included her. Their fear of becoming as outcast as she was would have been too much for most of them.

The point of her story is that when Jesus was made known of her presence, he did not hesitate to acknowledge her. Indeed, he not only acknowledged her, he restored her health, he also restored her to her position in the community. He spoke to her with compassion and even called her, “daughter.” Once more, she was not only cured, her status among all the rest of the people was returned to her. Without Jesus’ healing, recognition and blessing, her trajectory would not have changed.

What I would like us to notice is I am using alternate – not alternative – trajectories. That is what Jesus was in the business of doing and offering.

What I mean is that Jesus did not only offer people a different way, an alternate way, he offered them a *new* way of living in the world. A new way to live life. A new way to be in relationship with God, and with each other. That new was the way of love, generosity, and compassion.

What Jesus did was break apart the customs that often separated people. He refused to allow boundaries such as gender roles, ethnic animosity, position and privilege – to prevent him from being in close and loving relationship with anyone and everyone. Jesus chose not to leave people in the conditions in which he found them, and in doing so, he has asked those who profess him as savior to do the same; to carry-on his ministry.

So, this is our challenge and our mission: as a Christian community we, too, are called to alter trajectories, and the conditions of peoples lives. To do this we must also be willing to cross boundaries and advocate life-giving meaning and change – whether they are related to ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation, politics or any other boundaries that divide us.

While this is a big and serious undertaking, there is good news. Our good news is that, in Christ, we have been given the example and the power of God’s love. We have that love, so we, too, may bring healing into the troubled world that surrounds us. We have experienced what it is like to know this love, this acceptance, and this blessing. Even more than this: we have each other and the way in which God’s Holy Spirit is moving in *our* heart and our life together.

And so, my prayer for us this morning is that we may take these amazing gifts and use them to glorify God through as many gestures of love and blessing for all of our time together as the body of Christ; that we go forth into the world ready and eager to alter the trajectories of hate and death, and instead go forth offering the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the life in the Spirit.

May this be so. Amen.