

“WHAT DOES FAITH LOOK LIKE?”

THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST--B

Pr. 8; LECTIONARY 13

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Peace Lutheran
Grass Valley, CA

THE FUNNY:

The minister of the local Church was visiting the Retirement Lodge Residents. After chatting with many of them she went over to a lady sitting in a wheelchair.

“Do you know who I am” the minister asked gently.

“No,” she said with a wonderfully wrinkled smile, “but if you go through that door and down to the Reception Desk, they will tell you.”

TEACHING POINTS:

1. Mark’s story line raises the question, “What does faith look like?”
2. This section gives two examples:
 - from the perspective of a social outcast;
 - from the perspective of a powerful man.
3. It’s key here how Jesus responds to the weak and vulnerable.
4. Faith looks like belief that life can be restored, dignity upheld and new doors opened.

THE MESSAGE:

There is just a lot going on in this reading from Mark today. It is one of those readings that has so many possibilities. There are plots and sub-plots. There is a story within the story.

As I think about these readings, these healings, in the larger picture of Mark’s gospel, I see Jesus acting to help paint a picture of what faith looks like. You see, these stories are not too far off the heels of the events in the storm, the story read last week. There has been another healing, of a man possessed with demons, immediately before. But it isn’t too far out of the context of Jesus’ question to the disciples, “Have you YET no faith?” It was a question about whether or not they were “getting” it. It was a question about what might be breaking through for them.

Recognizing that there were many ways of picturing this story, the idea that comes to my mind is that these are two examples of what faith looks like. Examples for the disciples, especially (they didn’t get it when others apparently did), to see how faith comes to work. Examples of what faith looks like for one in the outer circle, an outcast, the ultimate outcast of society. On the other hand, for one in the inner circle, although, even a prominent man in the inner circle.

So we start with Jairus, a synagogue official, who isn't used to begging for anything. He is desperate. He has deep love for his daughter — evidenced by the fact that important men of the time didn't normally "waste" time and affection on "girl" children.

This man is desperate. He knows that he has no control of this situation. It is obvious that he is helpless. He goes to Jesus. He "begs" from his knees for Jesus' help — unusual for a person of power. A powerful man who is willing to go face to face with Jesus to ask for help. A powerful man who recognizes his need and admits it, opening himself up for Jesus to do what Jesus does best — change lives.

Just as this scene gets going, there is an interruption. An interruption by a woman, a social outcast, who happens to be in the crowd milling around Jesus. She is bleeding and pushes her way through just to get close. Understand, that a bleeding person is "ritually unclean" and she shouldn't be out in a crowd in the first place and she certainly shouldn't be touching people. She too has heard about Jesus. She too is desperate. She too doesn't want to accept the fate of her condition.

Jesus senses what has happened, the Bible says, "he felt the power go out of him" and turns to her. He could have yelled at her. He had every right to do so according to the customs of the times. Instead, he says, "Your faith has made you well." It wasn't Jesus who healed her. She courageously reached out in faith. It was the faith in her touch.

What is interesting here is that she poured out the "whole truth". She could have hidden in the crowd. She could have just given a simple answer. Instead she poured out her whole story. She told the whole truth. She gave her whole self to Jesus and held nothing back.

It is this yielding that is the source of her healing. The woman's faith in the possibility that Jesus changes lives has made her well. She goes in peace, whole and free of the torment and suffering.

But wait. Now Jesus has been made "ritually unclean." He has "touched" an "unclean person." He should withdraw for the crowd. He should keep his distance. However, he continues on his way to Jairus' house. In fact, when he could have turned back, when the word came that the daughter was dead, he could have went on to other things. He could have avoided the deathbed like many of us are prone to do. But he didn't. He goes to her. He will not abide by the voices of resignation, "I can't change it." He invites Jairus to not fear, but only believe. Not to fear what which he cannot change. Not to fear what he thinks is happening. Not to fear the future. Jesus invites Jairus to believe in healing. To believe that entrusting life to Jesus there can be health and wholeness.

Jesus changes lives, even out of death.

So within the healing stories, Jesus responds to people at the bottom of the social ladder, a bleeding woman, whom Jesus calls "daughter" and, at the other end of the spectrum, the "daughter" of a powerful man. Within these healing stories, Jesus challenges the laws what worked against the most vulnerable of people.

What I read here is this: in their vulnerability and weakness, these people have no claim on Jesus except their brokenness. Their brokenness makes them vulnerable. Their brokenness makes them needy. But they do not run from that brokenness. They claim it. They embrace it. They confess it. They let it become a motive for going to Jesus. In Jesus' presence they let their pain and despair be heard and in their groaning open up their life stories to Jesus. It is their openness that becomes the faith that brings them healing. While those with no "faith" are willing to remain enmeshed in their patterns of always seeking to control their own lives.

I don't know how you're feeling these days, but the rapid-fire events of the last few weeks, have sure left me with a sense of vulnerability. I'm having a hard time getting my bearings with so many feelings. I keep recognizing how many thoughts are motivated by the fears that I've created. I'm having a hard time digging into my brokenness when it comes to understanding and dealing with people different from me. I'm trying to get more deeply in touch with my own biases, prejudices and the inconsistencies in my worldview. Maybe you recognize the same vulnerability and brokenness in your own life. It is this brokenness, vulnerability and need that has led Bishop Eaton to declare this day of "repentance, prayer and mourning."

We know that it could be pretty easy to embrace a "It can't be changed attitude." Or an "ain't it awful lament." It could be pretty easy to build layers of emotional insulation around our hurt, our brokenness and our need. It might be pretty easy to turn our backs on Jesus, convincing ourselves that we don't need Jesus' healing, or that we won't let ourselves cede our control to Jesus.

The characters in the Gospel today, though demonstrate that giving voice to pain, brokenness and need cracks the facade of human power. The groans of need acknowledge the sovereignty of God, who is there to receive us, heal us, mend our pain, tend to our wound. In our groans of need there is healing, healing which, as it is portrayed in Mark's gospel, transforms and brings newness through faith. Faith that conquers our fears. Faith heals pain and despair. Faith frees in forgiveness and faith heals our mourning.

As we kneel before the Lord today (like Jairus did, perhaps), we do so in need. We do so as broken people. We do so because somewhere deep inside we recognize our need. Some where by the power of the Holy Spirit, we know that in our need, by faith, Jesus brings healing, transformation and life.

Jesus invites us to come, to kneel, and to admit our need!!

Jesus invites us here in order that with his word and touch, our fear can be conquered by faith, our needs filled with his grace, and our vulnerability be replaced with deep and lasting hope and that the ways that lead to death can become new roads into the life power of his kingdom.

Jesus is here to change lives. Even our lives.

Jesus is here to satisfy needs. Even our needs.

Jesus is here. Amen.