

5th Sunday of Pentecost
Sermon 6.28.15
Scripture: Mark 5:21-43

Toby and Jack are both going to sleep-away camp this summer—at Silver Lake Conference Center, which is the outdoor ministry site for the Connecticut Conference of the United Church of Christ. Their good friends, Harris and Hudson, are also going to sleep-away camp, theirs a Jewish camp. Comparing the two, I said to their mother, “Swimming at Jewish camp is a drag, though. The water keeps parting.”

“Well, at church camp you’re never submerged. You can only just walk across the lake.”

Maybe, but I doubt it. After all, Jesus just as often sailed across the lake as walked across it.

The beginning of this two-for-one story that is so typical of the Gospel of Mark mentions Jesus having crossed again in the boat to the other side. This takes place at the Sea of Galilee, which is actually, as the preacher Frederick Buechner notes, “a large freshwater lake some thirteen miles long and eight miles across surrounded by high mountains and apparently roughly the shape of a heart—rather wonderful, a heart-shaped lake at the heart of where it all happened.”

He had come back from the other side, having first gone to the other side perhaps thinking this move would bring some relief. The other side was the Gentile side, and so was a place where (Jesus might have thought, as a Jew) no one would know him, or even know *of* him and still less care. After all, the crowds that had come to follow him were crushing, stifling. The crowds were, of course, attracted by Jesus’ acts of healing and exorcism, which surely are emblematic of how it must have felt to be near him (healed and whole, inspired and awake). And they’d begun to grow—these crowds; had become unmanageable. The press of people, constant, always, made it so he couldn’t even eat. He had no peace—and there’s a lot in the gospel narratives that suggests Jesus was a man who needed peace, who needed quiet and solitude, who needed prayer and the still, small presence of God. Such things now impossible to come by, this situation would likely be draining, intolerable.

And so he crossed to the other side—the other side of the lake, the Gentile side.

But even there, there was no relief—yet not because a crowd of people recognized him, but because a legion of unclean spirits did. They occupied a man who, tormented, lived among the tombs, and scratched and cut himself with sharp stones all day long. Jesus directed the spirits to “come out of the man.” He then sent them into a herd of swine (remember, we’re on the Gentile side of the lake, where you might just find a herd of swine) and the herd then dove headlong over a cliff.

It’s a strange story, one that the swineherds were no less stunned by than we are; and it had them running off to the city and the country where they told everyone all about it—such that crowds of people came to see the once-tormented man now “clothed and in his right mind,” and, of course, to see the healer who had made it so.

So much for discretion. So much for solitude.

So, Jesus crossed back to the other side. And why not, since “great crowds” now waited for him on all shores, both foreign and familiar?

It was Jairus. This is what’s noteworthy about the crowd on this side of the lake. It was Jairus who was at its forefront—Jairus, one of the leaders of the synagogue.

As far as we know, Jairus hasn’t featured in any encounter with Jesus prior to this, according to Mark. But that synagogue has. Jesus is said to have spent two Sabbaths there, and might have done more.

Of the first such Sabbath, it’s told that Jesus taught during the service—and taught as one with authority. He then exorcised a demon out of a man that confronted him: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!”

That he did this on the Sabbath presented a problem.

Of the second, it’s told that Jesus encountered a man with a withered hand, whom he then healed. And that he did this on the Sabbath presented a problem, but this time one he pushed back against. “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?”

In sum, it's likely the leadership of this synagogue had made note of Jesus, even those leaders who hadn't encountered him face-to-face. And this is to say that, even if Jairus hadn't yet encountered Jesus face-to-face, it's likely he knew of him, and knew that he was problematic, dangerous even. This one broke laws, broke divine law.

But, you know, if he was willing to break divine law he might also have it in him to break natural law.

Yes, it's likely Jairus suspected would help—and not just able to, but compelled to help, compelled by some flow of compassion that doesn't stop, not even when it's supposed to stop.

“My little daughter is at the point of death...” I bet it was desperation that brought him to Jesus. Jesus! I bet is hopeful and shameful desperation.

It's been said the people of the olden days were more circumspect about latching on to their children than we are nowadays. They tended not to get too attached because so many children didn't survive childhood, leaving so many parents, then, to have to survive such loss—loss that would be easier to manage if it's not accompanied by shock and heartbreak.

It's also been said that daughters were of lesser value in general than sons. Daughters were sort of disposable. Indeed, the most you could hope for in their regard was to get rid of them, to marry them off. Sons, on the other hand, were essential—they could work, they could grow food or earn money.

I don't know if either of these is true, but if either is—and, moreover, if both are—then the fact of Jairus' desperate desire to save his daughter is all the sweeter.

So he went with him, Jesus did—went with Jairus through the pressing crowd.

But he didn't get far before being interrupted—a woman who had been suffering hemorrhages for twelve years (the same length of time as the dying girl's age), a flow of lifeblood that didn't stop, not even when it was supposed to. Twelve years she'd been both unclean and barren, which likely made her life painfully lonely.

Twelve: it's a significant number in the life of Israel and in the Bible. It's also significant because a girl, at the age of twelve, would be considered a woman and might even have begun to menstruate. The girl, then, faced death just when she was

perhaps gaining the power to create life. And the woman, then, had had this power to create life go terribly awry—and perhaps for much of the time she had it. It might be coincidence. It might be numeric symbolism. Or it might be a suggestive statement about Jesus’ compassion especially for women as essential to, and yet vulnerable to, the creation of new life.

And while we’re at it, here’s another twinning: both the woman and Jesus have power that simply flows. Out, out, out of control.

But if Jesus couldn’t control it, he certainly could sense it—for the story tells us, “Immediately...” (There’s that word, Mark’s favorite word. *Euthys*, immediately: indicative of the Holy Spirit taking action, immediacy implies not speed but intimacy, direct encounter. And Mark uses it all the time in his gospel.) “Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him...” It makes me wonder what power going forth from you feels like. It makes me wonder if Jesus’ power to heal can be drained, needs to be recharged. (If so, I bet solitude is part of the replenishing. But he wouldn’t get such things now, would he?) It makes me wonder if now the dying girl was in jeopardy of not being saved, for if Jesus is drained then what of the next person in need of him?

It’s a moot point, though, apparently, because the dying girl had by now died. Some people had come from the leader’s house to say, with what sounds like cruel dispassion, “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?” Meanwhile, professional mourners, like ancient undertakers, had come to fill the house, to wail and keen as was appropriate.

But Jesus had this to offer Jairus, “Do not fear, only believe.”

Is it significant that he didn’t say what Jairus was to believe? “Do not fear, only believe in me.” “Do not fear, only believe in the power of life.” Do not fear, only believe in the strength and vitality within your daughter.” The imprecision here could drive you a little crazy, might have struck Jairus as unhelpful at best. But it has me thinking on poet Christian Wiman’s notice that faith has “no object.”

Having been raised in an evangelical family and community and church in Texas, Wiman recognizes that the faith of his youth was filled with objects. Heaven was a place you would clearly imagine and conceive of. Hell was a place as real as any

other place. The Bible was the answer to every question, and the Lord was as tangible and accessible as your best friend. You knew what clothes to put on in the morning because the Lord told you. You knew what book to choose in the library because the Lord told you. Of so much of what churches have on offer, he says, “In my worst [moments], I’m simply wandering through a discount shopping mall of myth, trying to convince myself there’s something worth buying.”

The faith of his adulthood has quite a different character. Now a poet, and a man who in his young middle age, with a wife and two young children, was found to have cancer of a rare and aggressive form, which promised to kill him, still promises to kill him, but hasn’t yet killed him; now such a person, his faith is much less concrete, much less muscular and self-assured.

Really, many practicing Christians wouldn’t recognize it as faith at all.

He speaks of apophatic language—language that negates its own meaning—which he asserts is the true language of God-talk, or in any event the most efficacious one. He writes, “We need to be shocked out of our easy acceptance of—or our facile resistance to—propositional language about God. Besides being useless as any definitive description of God, such language is simply not adequate for the sacred spiritual turmoil that so many contemporary people feel.”

Apophatic language—language that empties itself that it might be true to what mystery it means to speak of—is the language of such faith as has no object. It is only faith—surrender, submission. It is only a falling into ultimacy in the faith that this ultimacy will catch you, will take you up. But even if not, you fall anyway.

“If God is, then that is right. If God is not, then that is right.”

“O Lord, let me not love thee if I love thee not.”

Wiman seems to think this is the Way Jesus leads us in and what the Lord requires—not that we will know, but that we will hope; not that we will be convinced, but that we will desire; not that we will be full of the Lord (which is in truth full of ourselves as someone who has ideas about the Lord), but that we will be empty as the Lord which is a sort of fullness as well.

“Do not fear, only believe.”

I love that Jairus accepts Jesus rather vague advice, or that he appears to anyway. For what else can he do? And I think I understand why. “Do not fear, only believe,” means you don’t have to imagine things correctly (or else) and you don’t have to understand things precisely (or else) and you don’t have to confess and proclaim things of God and Jesus in some certain way (or else, or else). You only have to believe. You only have to breathe. You only have to follow—for we’re going to your house, Jairus, and your daughter will be alive.

The dispassion of the crowd now filling Jairus’ house turns to scoffing, though, once Jesus and Jairus and Peter, James, and John reach the house and Jesus claims, “The child isn’t dead but sleeping.” So, at this Jesus put the crowd outside—a striking thing when you consider that the last thing Jesus is said to have “put outside” is the legion of unclean spirits that once occupied the man in Gerasa who lived among the tombs. Jesus put that legion outside, and now puts the crowd gathered around the sad spectacle of death outside.

I wonder what the connection is—in Jesus’ experience, and in the gospel hearer’s understanding. Does a crowd ever feel like an expression of an unclean spirit? Does a crowd ever feel like it’s possessed of something that the individuals who make up the crowd would never in a million years do?

It’s not for nothing that a lynching always required a crowd, and preferably one whose members’ individual identities were obscured. White masks and robes usually did the trick.

Jesus needed not to let what occupied this crowd of mourners and scoffers occupy him and those who came with him. Setting them outside, then, cleared the space so it could be occupied by something altogether. It emptied it out that it might full in a quite different way.

And so Jairus’ daughter lived. And so the woman with the hemorrhages was healed. And so, and so...

This is a quite straightforward story, with some interesting details to life up and understand further. Most of all it’s to illustrate what being with Jesus was like, is like.

Sally and Steve gave Toby, yet unborn, a gift—a copy of one of their favorite children’s illustrated books, *Grandfather Twilight*. In it, Grandfather Twilight walks through the woods spreading a moonlit sky of pinks and blues while the woodland creatures bed down for the night. The spreading of this moonlight is like a spreading of peace and tranquility—and it’s how I imagine Mark’s imagining Jesus.

I’ve been more conscious of it this year than other years when we’ve followed Mark’s narrative. That Mark imagined Jesus as one who came to free the world from an occupying enemy force; that Mark understood Jesus as one who came to spread a contagion of purity and compassion amidst a world teeming with corruption and cruelty; that Mark experienced sin as God’s good world overrun now by powers and principalities not of God, and that he experienced salvation in Christ setting such powers and principalities to flight, what is cruel and corrupt ceding the territory back to God who is kind and good: I’ve been more aware this year than others of Mark’s particular, and potent, way of experiencing Jesus.

Jesus as one, not unlike Grandfather Twilight, who walks through though world, which is brimming with beauty but also pain, with tenderness but also torment; walking along and in simply so doing and spreading healing, solace, hope, love.

That’s what Mark experiences Jesus to have been and to be. The stories he tells that indicate this also invite us into that same experience of goodness setting evil to flight, of life and light setting death and darkness to flight. What flows from him flows to us, and (if we’re the people God means us to be) then through us.

Just one touch.

Reach out your hand.

Thanks be to God.