

“Generous Healing”

Mark 5:21-43

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A few months ago, I felt something pinching against my toe. At a certain point in life, the acquisition of new aches and pains happens so frequently that you tend to lose track. You tend to forget that something new hurts. At first, I didn't pay much attention, but it kept coming back. Eventually, I looked at my toe and noticed a callous had developed, and so I did what every right-thinking person in America does, I looked up Youtube videos of removing callouses. My father, after all, carried a pocket knife with him that did everything from performing minor surgery to trimming the rose bushes, usually without cleaning it, so I figured I could take care of this myself. The problem with that approach is that suddenly your computer screen is flooded with all the wretched horrible images of things that could go wrong – and so I went to the doctor.

It's the way we handle things -- unless your handy with using dirty pocket knives to perform bathroom surgeries, which I don't recommend. We might even call it the “American way.” If something causes us pain, disrupts our lives, or keeps us from experiencing the fullness of life we carve it out. When pain of some sort intrudes in our lives, we have a choice: we either limp along and deny that something is wrong, or we take care of it.

That's the way things are supposed to work – unless, of course, you have tried all those things. *Unless* you have been proactive in seeking treatments, in gathering opinions. *Unless* you have spent all of your money seeking a cure from a condition that rendered you socially unacceptable, and that had inflicted immense pain and suffering, causing you to be shut out of the world.

If you have done all those things – if you have been suffering for more than 12 years, visiting doctors, seeking a cure, sitting uncomfortably while strangers examined and probed you – if you had done all of that, and it did not work, then what do you do? Here is the classic pre-existing condition, an illness that had kept her excluded from community.

When there are no more options, what do you do?

During the memorial service for her mother, my wife Carol told a story that I had long forgotten. My mother in law's father and step-mother did not attend church when she was little. Her step mom could be a difficult and even abusive person at times. Life was not always easy for Jackie, who was an only child for many years. However, she was close to her aunt and

uncle and her cousin. Her cousin's family attended the Presbyterian church every week, and there was something about that church that resonated with Jackie. So at a very young age, Jackie began saving a nickel of her lunch money every week so that she could ride the bus early on Sunday mornings and go to the Presbyterian church with her cousin.

When you don't have options, what do you do? When Carol was telling that story, I thought, "No wonder my children are so determined!" But it struck me that sometimes when life comes so easy, we forget about the sort of risks and sacrifices others willingly undergo to find meaning in their lives.

Mark's two-part lesson tells the story of two people who had run out of options. Jesus steps off the boat and is swarmed by crowds. They're eager to hear him. They're anxious to see if what they have heard is true. Not exactly sure what to expect, they follow his every move, waiting for something incredible to happen.

And as it turns out, they did not need to wait too long. A religious leader, a respected leader, rushes up to him. The smell of sea air surrounds them, and the crowd is teeming, but Jairus pushes through and falls at Jesus' feet. His daughter is dying. There are no more options. We have done all we can do. Can you come?

But no sooner have they set out to Jairus' house when the crowds keep pushing on Jesus. It's Time Square in New York City, or Dierberg's the night before a snowstorm. Crowds are pushing and pressing against Jesus. Hidden in the crowd is a woman crippled by pain. She is unclean, forbidden to be in public. But still she pushes – because, well, after 12 years of being poked and prodded on by doctors, and still no cure, what else can you?

When you are out of options, you push forward – somehow.

There's a danger, says theologian Karoline Lewis, in trying too quickly to apply lessons from scripture to daily life. She says it always reminds her of applying sunscreen before going to the beach – as if Scripture was a lotion that protects us from the damaging UV rays of life's challenges.¹ A more helpful understanding is to hear the story of scripture and to place our lives against that story – layering it close like we were building a sandwich.

And when we do that with these stories, suddenly the living word of scripture captures our attention. Pushed to the limit, the woman clings to faith. Scared of the future that awaits him at home, Jairus clings to faith – not the promise of magic, but the hope of wholeness.

"If I but touch his clothes."

When we layer that story against our own experiences – the anxiety of waiting for biopsy reports, the heartache of watching a loved one struggle with dementia, the onslaught of depression – we hear the promise of a God who stands with those who are suffering. And when

¹ Karoline Lewis, *Working Preacher*, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5184>, accessed 6/30/2018.

we put this story against the pain others in our world face – the addicts, the immigrant, the refugee, families separated – it becomes clear that the good news of the Gospel is that God yearns to bring healing to all who are suffering. Jesus, aware that something has gone out of his body, turns and looks around – all around. The crowd stops. He looks at every face, wondering, “Who touched my clothes?” The crowd parts a little as this woman, scared and trembling comes forward and owns up to what she has done.

She told him the whole truth – she told him her whole story. She owned the truth of who she was and how she had been excluded – and Jesus told her, “Your faith has made you well...go in peace.”

When I put this story side by side to my life or the life of the world around me, what I begin to sense is what it means for us to be the presence of God in this world. Jesus comes, Mark says, announcing the power of God, the good news of salvation. Jesus comes to bring healing to the daughter of the religious leader and to bring healing to the suffering woman. Jesus stands in the middle of the suffering – and I believe that is the call we are offered as well.

At 4 p.m. on May 27, 1992, a line of starving people were killed as they waited in front of the only bakery in Sarajevo, Bosnia that was still making bread. Twenty-two people were killed in that attack.

At the same time, Vedran Smailovic,² the principal cellist of the Sarajevo Opera Theater, stood in his apartment building about a 100 yards away and watched the attack. The next day, according to Sr. Joan Chittister, Smailovic watched as more hungry people lined up again for bread – “certain,” she writes, “that they would die if they didn’t come to the bakery and well aware that they could die if they did.”

Smailovic took his cello, dressed in his performance tuxedo, and sat in the square surrounded by the debris and began playing. He went back to that spot for the next 21 days. Chittister says, “It was his refusal to surrender the hope that beauty could be reborn in the midst of a living hell.”³

That is the promise of God’s generous healing for all those who are suffering: even in a living hell the beauty of grace is born. Amen.

² <https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2012/04/06/natpkg-bosnian-cello-player-remembers-sarajevo.cnn>

³ Joan Chittister, “Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope.”