

Church of the Crossroads
Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 2, 2006
Neal MacPherson

LESSONS IN FAITH

Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15
Mark 5:21-43

In word and music, we have just heard the story that has been called “The Raising of the Daughter of Jairus.” That title 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 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. Mark may well have also had in mind the twelve tribes of Israel and the fact that Jairus is a leader in the synagogue. Is the story saying that Israel, now dead, is being brought to life, just like the daughter of Jairus who has been raised to newness of life? Perhaps.

We also need to keep in mind the theme of religious purity. The woman seeking healing 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. Furthermore, Jesus violates the purity codes when he touches the hand of the dead girl. The purity system did not allow any touching of a dead body.

Furthermore, we need to keep in mind the contrasts to be found in the entire story. 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 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. They do not want to be bothered by the desire of Jesus to know who touched him, so intent are they to get to the other story. 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, 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 the readers of the story to question whether or not they 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 faith teach us? Well, the last time I preached a three point sermon, it was so well received that I have decided to do it again this morning.

In truth, there are many faith lessons to be learned from this story, but I would like to mention just three. First, from the story reminds us that we who are trying to be faithful might want to open ourselves up to the faith stories of others. At times we are so caught up in our own desire to be faithful 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. When the crowd announces to Jairus that his daughter is dead, Jesus says, surely with the woman in mind, "Do not fear, only believe."

One of the privileges of being your pastor is 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 step out of the crowd. 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 too the contrary, her faith led to boldness. To touch the cloak of Jesus, she had to step out of the crowd, 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 to Jesus “in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.” Faith causes the woman to be bold 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 the war. 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. (By the way, the teachings of Jesus around wealth and poverty far outnumber his teachings on 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 step out of the crowd. Thank God there are those who still do just that. We think of Ehren Watada who is refusing to fight in the Iraqi War, and of Al Gore who has staked his whole political career and personal integrity on his mission to warn us about global warming. In this regard, I think also of those evangelical Christian leaders who have stepped out of their own communities to say boldly that say we must do something now to stop the warming of our planet.

Church of the Crossroads has always been a faith community willing to step out of the crowd. I pray that we as a people will always be willing to step out of the crowd and so take the risk of putting our faith into action.

Thirdly, and finally, our story teaches us that our faith is always to be placed in the God whose will it is to bring forth newness of life. In the words of the Wisdom of Solomon, God does not delight in the death of the living, for God created us for life. Faith perceives that God is here among us to bring forth life from death, hope from despair. Faith places its trust in the God who surely desires healing and wholeness for all who suffer from the many dis-eases of mind, body, and spirit, even when there cannot be a cure. God's concern is for us and all people, for this life, and this world.

Faith trusts the God who brings forth life from death. Perhaps the most tragic death of all is the death of the human spirit. I have a sense that this was the real death that the unnamed woman of our story was experiencing. The human spirit yearns for life and wholeness, but so often seems to be caught up in a deep, underlying despair, a despair that does not allow us to truly live. A poem called *A Partial History of My Stupidity* by Edward Hirsch, found in a recent issue of *The New Yorker*, reads:

Traffic was heavy coming off the bridge
and I took the road to the right, the wrong one,
and got stuck in the car for hours.

Most nights I rushed out into the evening
without paying attention to the trees,
whose names I didn't know,
or the birds, which flew heedlessly on.

I couldn't relinquish my desires
or accept them, and so I strolled along
like a tiger that wanted to spring,
but was still afraid of the wildness within.

The iron bars seemed invisible to others,
but I carried a cage around inside me.

I cared too much what other people thought
and made remarks I shouldn't have made.
I was silent when I should have spoken.

Forgive me, philosophers,
I read the Stoics but never understood them.

I felt that I was living the wrong life,
spiritually speaking,
while halfway around the world
thousands of people were being slaughtered,
some of them by my countrymen.

So I walked on – distracted, lost in thought –
and forgot to attend to those who suffered
far away, nearby.

Forgive me, faith, for never having any.

I did not believe in God,
who eluded me.

In a moving way, this poem says it all. The implication is that faith is here to save us, to bring us to life, and that the God who so often seems to elude us, is there, with us, seeking to enliven our spirits, ready to grant us and the world wholeness.

As for this morning's story from the Gospel of Mark, may we, whatever be our name, be like the unnamed woman of our Gospel story whose faith led her to step out of the crowd, because she believed in the God for whom nothing is impossible, the God who leads us into life. May it be so. Amen.