

Jesus and the Followers
Mark 5.21-43
June 28, 2015
Pentecost +5 Year B
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

I.

A couple of weeks ago, *The New York Times Magazine* ran a story about the child preachers of Brazil. Thought to have a unique and powerful connection to God, these children come before congregations to share a word, a prediction, a prayer...

Alani, an 11-year-old girl, prays, teaches, and blesses. At one service:

Roughly half the congregants made their way forward. Some hobbled, and some were held up by attendants. Many had copies of recent medical exams in their hands. Alani stood onstage wearing a pink dress and cardigan with matching sparkly shoes, nervously finger-combing her hair. She made her way slowly through the line of sufferers as they explained their symptoms: low platelet counts, chronic anxiety, swollen joints. She listened to each story with precocious focus and empathy, seeming to grasp both the gravity of their ailments and the gravity of her own power to ease them.

Accompanying the story were photographs of adults lining up for a healing touch from the child preachers. Weeping, desperate, all options exhausted, these grown people waited at the feet of children for a touch on the head or hand that might make them whole again.¹

If I told you this morning that you could receive a healing touch, you might laugh a little. Or you might feel a tinge of hope swell that quickly subsides because you don't want to hope in such things. Or you might feel the blush of shame as you think of your brokenness, your grief, your fear that never quite seems to go away. You are carrying something with you today that you want to release. We are carrying things this morning that we all want to release. Don't push the thought away. Don't push the feeling away. Maybe jot down in your bulletin a word or image that holds this place for you. **What do you carry today that you want desperately to release?**

II.

The father and the woman in today's gospel text are desperate for healing; the first for his daughter, the second for herself. They felt the shame, hope, fear, and desperation that we all feel. And they went to Jesus to name it.

The crowds were always around Jesus, and Mark makes that abundantly clear. The crowds show up, they grow, they follow. Jesus teaches them, feeds them, goes away from them,

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/14/magazine/the-child-preachers-of-brazil.html?_r=2

returns to them. There are throngs of people, the text says. Picture Napoleon and St. Charles as that Muses shoe or Bacchus alligator or the 610 Stompers make the turn before screaming masses. Throngs.

And in the midst of the throngs, a man named Jairus appears and asks for healing for his daughter. And Jesus stops what he is doing to go with Jairus. The throngs follow. Jairus is prominent, known. Jesus is popular, followed. The two together are an intriguing scene, and surely the desperation and hope are palpable. So Jairus and Jesus are leading the throngs to heal the girl when WHOOSH...

Who touched me?

What a ridiculous question. The throngs are necessarily touching and bumping into each other as they chase after this healing story. But in the middle of the winding journey to Jairus' 12-year-old daughter is a woman who has run out of options. Nothing has worked, nothing has healed her, she's spent all of her time and money trying. And whatever ails her requires her, under 1st-century Jewish purity codes, to stay away from her community. She has stayed away for twelve years, in fact.

She slips into the throng and works her way to Jesus and she GRABS his cloak. And his healing energy surges from him to her, and she feels it and he feels it. And they stop. And he looks around for her. Maybe the throngs are still buzzing with excitement and noise. Maybe they grow silent as the procession halts. The woman fesses up and raises her hand, "I touched you," she admits. And Jesus goes to her to heal her all the way, "Shalom," he whispers. The flourishing, complete peace of God be with you and wash over you and restore you to community and to your best self. No hiding and grabbing anymore. Shalom, my daughter, shalom.

In his detailed study of the Greek text, Mark Davis notes the Greek wording tells us the action—to grab—is part of the continued thread of all the steps she has taken to be made well. She has been bleeding for years and has also seen healers and doctors and has also spent all of her money and nothing has worked, "AND, she also heard about Jesus and she also went into this pressing throng of people – to grab his garment. **She is as defined by her determination as by her suffering.** That is the value of respecting Mark's string of participles and being patient for the main verb. After all that she suffered and did, she grabbed his garment."²

III.

We want this healing for ourselves, do we not? One of the reasons we are here is that word or image we jotted down just a minute ago. That thing we carry often propels us here to this place either to hold it in the light for a little while or be around some kind faces who distract us from it for a bit. When asked in an interview last year about her relationship to faith community, Brene Brown said, "I went to church thinking it would be

² <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/06/begging-believers-and-scoring-skeptics.html>

like an epidural, that it would take the pain away...But church isn't like an epidural; it's like a midwife...I thought faith would say, 'I'll take away the pain and discomfort, but what it ended up saying was, 'I'll sit with you in it.'"³

I am not here to numb your pain this morning. If you are sitting in this room with a wound, I offer you, quite simply, the comfort of knowing you are not sitting here alone. And I offer you the promise that you are not the only one who is wounded. We cannot heal all things, but we can sit with each other. It's what Jesus did so well—seeing, naming, offering peace, reaching out to touch and comfort. We can do these things, too.

My favorite scene in the new Pixar movie *Inside Out* comes as Joy and Sadness are on their journey back to their proper place in the mind of an 11-year-old girl. Joy, Sadness, Anger, Disgust, and Fear all live and work together as part of Riley's mind. It's Joy who takes the lead in Riley's emotions, and Joy works hard to keep Sadness out of the day-to-day operations. In that struggle, Joy and Sadness get lost for a while and journey together to get back home. As they travel, Joy is in a hurry but Sadness is not. Along the way they pick up an old, imaginary friend named Bing Bong from Riley's childhood, and all is well until he loses a favorite and central element of his imaginary play with Riley. Joy wants to keep moving, keep traveling, keep laughing and stay happy because there's nothing she can do to fix the problem and it distracts from their ultimate goal of getting home. But Bing Bong is bereft and can't keep going.

Sadness sits down beside him and just waits as he cries. She names his grief and listens. She doesn't hurry him. She is sad with him. And when he's ready, because he has grieved and been heard, the group continues their journey.

Jesus sits like Sadness sits. In our culture's pace, Jesus should be in a tearing hurry. He should be *racing* to Jairus' house. But Jesus doesn't hurry. Jesus understands interruptions as sacred, and he makes time for this woman who has boldly approached him and grabbed what she needs from Jesus.

IV.

As a people, the past week-and-a-half have been complex. Tragic loss in a Charleston church, emotional conversations around race and cultural symbols, more discussion about guns and how to manage them. Supreme Court decisions about the Affordable Care Act and Marriage Equality that have left throngs dancing in the street but others gnashing their teeth. These are complicated times to be neighbors, to be community, to sit with both Joy and Sadness.

As individuals, we sometimes already carry enough and don't have patience or energy left to give to someone else's *stuff*—their grief, their anger, their disappointment—ours is enough. Or maybe we don't want to be faced with any of it because it reminds us of what we're trying to push away and stoically leave in its private box. Or we've been told all of our lives that we should be joyful and polite, pleasant and non-controversial. We don't

³ quoted by Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, p. 209

know how to do this Sadness thing or this hard conversation thing or this disagreeing with your neighbor but loving him anyway thing.

There is something in the pace and way of Jesus that will be our guide. What do we do when there is great pain? What do we do when we vehemently disagree with our neighbors? What do we do with the grief and fear we carry? How might we heal? How might we be healed?

V.

Beginning next week, we will read Rachel Held Evans' book *Searching for Sunday* together. In her chapters on healing, she offers a way of honest community:

"[T]here is a difference between curing and healing, and I believe the church is called to the slow and difficult work of healing. We are called to enter into one another's pain, anoint it as holy, and stick around no matter the outcome.

The thing about healing as opposed to curing, is that it is relational. It takes time. It is inefficient, like a meandering river. Rarely does healing follow a straight or well-lit path...Walking with someone through grief, or through the process of reconciliation, requires patience, presence, and a willingness to wander, to take the scenic route.

But the modern-day church doesn't like to wander or wait. The modern-day church likes *results*. Convinced the gospel is a product we've got to sell to an increasingly shrinking market, we like our people to function as walking advertisements: happy, put-together, finished-proof that this Jesus stuff WORKS!

But if the world is watching, we might as well tell the truth. And the truth is, the church doesn't offer a cure. It doesn't offer a quick fix. The church offers death and resurrection. The church offers the messy, inconvenient, gut-wrenching, never-ending work of healing and reconciliation. The church offers *grace*.

Anything else we try to peddle is snake oil. It's not the real thing."⁴

Jesus and Jairus are about to shift their attention back to their journey when they receive word that they're too late. Jairus' daughter is gone. They travel anyway. They go to the house anyway. Jesus reaches out to her anyway, and he calls to the little girl, "Get up." And as though she has merely been asleep, the dead girl wakes, and Jesus makes sure she is fed. There is gentle healing in his touch. There is power in his presence. And somehow, mysteriously and imperfectly, that same power is available to us in this place if we will "get up" from our ways of doing and being and walk toward this way of Jesus.

That doesn't mean we can cure all that ails us. If we want to be the kind of people who sit with each other in the honest moment, if we want to be the kind of people who tell the

⁴ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching For Sunday*, pp. 208-209

truth about our lives, if we want to be the kind of people who bring God's shalom into the world, then we read in these stories "Christ's charge to us... To see people who for they really are, unique persons, each created in the image of God, and each worthy of our attention, care, love, and respect. Christ calls us to leave the comfortable and familiar behind in order to reach out to others as brothers and sisters, all children of God."⁵

I want to offer a ritual to you this morning. As she talks about healing, Evans also describes the ancient rituals of anointing with oil saying, "The journey through suffering is a fraught and holy commission...Healing may come through medicine, through prayer, through presence and scent and calming touch, or through the consecrating of the journey as holy...There is nothing magic about oil. It is merely a carrier—of memory, of healing, of grace...We anoint to soothe, to dignify, and even in our suffering, to remember the scent of God."⁶

As we sing our closing hymn, I will be present at the front with oil. If you want to bring that word or that image with you, if you want to share a moment of touch and blessing for your journey, I will be here to receive you.

Amen.

⁵ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/06/pentecost-5-b-known-and-named/>

⁶ Evans, p. 205