

Proper VIII Year B: 30 June/ 1 July 2018

St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

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**Prayer, as asking something of God, is to edge closer and deeper
into relationship with God.**

Wisdom of Solomon 1: 13-5, 2: 23-24

2 Corinthians 8: 7-15

Mark 5: 21-43

Psalm 30

"This is about faith triumphing over despair and justice prevailing over oppression. It's a call to honor one another, to love one another in spite of our disagreements. It's an invitation to be civil towards those who differ from us and seek to understand their story. It's about entering into relationship with God and our neighbor, whoever that may be."

Leave it to Jesus to cause a ruckus. First, he just had to get to the other side of the sea and give witness to the gentiles. As if that didn't cause enough of a stir –he was, after all, asked to leave for performing an exorcism that bewildered, amazed, and frightened the Gentile populace – he goes back to the Jewish side of the sea and is greeted by a mob of people all clamoring to be near him, which is an amazing occurrence considering there wasn't any "social media" in First Century Palestine, at least not in any form we would recognize. In Jesus' time, it was all word of mouth that spread the news. It must've been quite the gossip fest that caused a mob to appear on the shores that day since it even managed to get the attention of the local synagogue's leader, who intentionally seeks Jesus out. Not the first time that's going to happen. Yet, here's Jairus, a learned man who most certainly sought out medical aid for his daughter, coming to Jesus asking for help. He's seeking healing for his daughter that she may be made well again. Predictably, Jesus offers empathy and follows Jairus to his home. But first, they have to pass through the gathered crowd who are jostling for Jesus' attention.

In the midst of this unfolding drama there's a second story brewing unbeknownst to Jesus and his disciples. Lurking in the crowd is a person deemed unclean due to uncontrolled hemorrhaging; who, as a woman, faced religious and social pressure such that her very life must have been a living hell. Unlike Jairus, this individual is not granted the privilege of being named per se other than through what ails her. By doing so – leaving her unnamed – this intercalated story (one story within another) gives voice and expression to the nature of God and God's grace at work in the world.

You see, blood is a vital part of ritual atonement: as an offering to God, i.e. the blood of a sacrificed animal. Life is in the blood, and thus eating or drinking blood is forbidden in Jesus' religious practice. Purity laws govern blood in Jewish teaching where a woman's discharge of blood rendered her "impure" until she was ritually cleansed in the mikveh. Until that ritual is complete, she wasn't to be touched nor associated with. Hence, this unnamed woman, being unable to stop the discharge of blood, was rendered almost perpetually unclean, the consequences of which made life for her nearly impossible.

She couldn't bear children and most probably was dismissed by her husband because of it, for no male would certainly have associated with her. As a result, she is an outcast in her community, an untouchable. This particular person has likely exhausted her limited resources in an effort to alleviate her condition. Finding no relief from her condition, she's left to endure a life of isolation and poverty, one where simple intimacy is denied her. As a result, she is absolutely powerless, which underscores her absolute vulnerability to society's whims and religion's statutes. In other words, she has nothing to lose by reaching out to simply touch Jesus' garments, holding on to the belief that doing so will heal her.

Therefore, it's no simple matter that she does indeed touch his garment. She's not intimidated by the crowd, who most certainly would have tried to prevent her from achieving her task. She breaks through the physical barrier of humanity as well as the socio-religious barrier of impurity. Faith carries her through and something wonderful happens. She is healed, and in that moment, though Jesus doesn't witness this directly, he too knows.

"Who touched me?" Jesus asks to the bewilderment of his disciples. Be serious, they must have thought. We're walking through a crowd of people all jostling for your attention and

you ask “who touched me”. Really? Jesus is well aware that it wasn’t simply a touch, but that grace flowed from him to another and he is determined to know to whom. Who dared to do such a thing? Undaunted of the consequences for her transgression of touching another person knowing that that person would be unclean as a result, she humbly confesses to Jesus. And what does Jesus do? He calls her daughter, and by doing so gives her dignity and presence in the community.

Jesus doesn’t reprimand her. What some would see as a scandalous touch yields wholeness, healing, and peace. And notice, the reading doesn’t say she was “cured”, only that she was healed. Yes, her bleeding stopped, but more importantly, she is restored within her community. Jesus’ response to her, by calling her daughter in public, is to seek relationship with her and acknowledge that her faith has brought healing. Where once she was ostracized, now she’s given social acceptability.

Now we move on to Jairus’ daughter who has died during the time span of Jesus’ encounter with the woman. Yet, once again, we see Jesus traversing the norms of his day by touching a corpse (he takes the dead girl’s hand into his own). All around him say, “don’t waste your time, she’s dead” to which he replies: nope. Once again, his disciples must have thought, he’s off his rocker. But faith does bring healing and Jairus’ daughter is restored to him.

This story within a story posits for us that grace isn’t reserved for the privileged few. That prayer isn’t a matter of seeking to bend the divine will to our own desires and needs. Prayer, as asking something of God, is to edge closer and deeper into relationship with God. Healing is found in so many ways that doesn’t necessarily equate curing. Both individuals in today’s reading sought Jesus and, when all seemed lost, petitioned healing from him. When society and religion give up, Jesus offers hope.

That’s something we all need to remember, especially those who are presently feeling a sense of despair in the midst of our current cultural state of being. Too many individuals are feeling vulnerable to forces that seem to be aligning against them, infringing on their ability to be expressive of their uniqueness. Civility in discourse seems lost amidst our selective memory. The seed of despair was sown long ago and we are reaping the harvest of that sowing. This despair hits close to home for many of us. Yet, Jesus offers us hope. Jesus offers us a truth: that

grace is abundant and that justice will prevail, even in the midst of our darkest fears. Matter-of-fact, it's God's grace through Jesus Christ that conquers and traverses the barriers we erect to define what is acceptable and not acceptable. If Jesus can put the needs of a most vulnerable person ahead of those with privilege and entitlement, so can we.

That's the sneaky truth of today's gospel: Jesus tended to the most vulnerable first. Though Jairus sought him out and Jesus was on his way to see Jairus' daughter, it was the least among the crowd that day that got his immediate attention. Faith, is a curious thing, and it's faith that prevails over the darkness of our hearts. It was faith that moved the woman to seek Jesus. It was faith that prevailed over the crowd. It was faith, when all else failed, that moved Jairus to seek Jesus. Both of these individuals sought Jesus and Jesus responds to each. Yet I can't avoid the fact that the most vulnerable among us is who God aligns with and who we are asked to consider.

This story isn't about gaining religious favor or scoring political points. Quite the opposite is true. This is about faith triumphing over despair and justice prevailing over oppression. It's a call to honor one another, to love one another in spite of our disagreements. It's an invitation to be civil towards those who differ from us and seek to understand their story. It's about entering into relationship with God and our neighbor, whoever that may be. We all need to judge less and be more accepting. Jesus tended to both, Jairus and the woman he called daughter. Can't we do the same?

Dark clouds may be looming for many, but there is hope. May we have the determination of the woman Jesus calls daughter to challenge the barriers to justice and do so with the humility of Jairus who waited for Jesus as he tended to the least among us.