

GOSPEL OF RISK - RISKING THE WHOLE TRUTH

Ordinary Time

Mark 5:21-43

A Sermon Preached by Pastor Catherine Foote
University Congregational Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture:

Mark 5:21-43¹

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." So Jesus went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. . . .

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her hemorrhaging stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed"

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little daughter, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Prayer:

God,
May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts
find acceptance in your sight, for you are our rock and our redeemer. – Amen.

So, I didn't grow up in a church, so I did not have a lot of opportunity when I was in *elementary* school to be particularly disruptive during the worship service. However, in high school we attended church

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). 1989.

Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday night, and there were all kinds of opportunities. Some of you might remember or know the old gospel hymn “He Touched Me.”

Shackled by a heavy burden
 ‘Neath a load of grief and shame
 Then the hand of Jesus touched me
 And now I am no longer the same.

He touched me. Oh, He touched me
 And oh the joy that floods my soul
 Something happened and now I know
 He touched me and made me whole.²

Well, I’ll tell you, if you’re a high school kid sitting in a pew about two-thirds of the way back and everybody is singing about how “He touched me” and we go into the chorus. Oh! You can guess. I just could not resist, sitting next to my best friend – Oh, yes! – Every time we sang that song I would touch my friend next to me and we would laugh; we would laugh! Sometimes (rarely) I would touch the person in front of me. ** (Aah.) ** I was a disruptive youth.

This is a story about touch. But it’s also a story we heard just now, about disruption, about interruption, about something starting out, and then stopping and turning around, and going a different way. As simple as this story is to hear, it might be easy miss the significance of that interruption, because it’s not just an interruption of one person starting to do one thing and then doing another. This is an interruption of the *social order* that Mark is writing about. It is a disruption of the hierarchy and the way things are.

If you want to get a feeling for what this disruption might have felt like, imagine yourself at a political rally. You are about to listen to someone very important. Perhaps this person is running to be president of the United States. And there you are waiting to hear what this man might have to say. And a young woman named Marissa Johnson steps up and takes the microphones and says, “Black lives matter. We are approaching the anniversary of a loss and this rally cannot continue until we pause and acknowledge that.”

I think some of you were at that rally. But even if you weren’t, do you remember how people felt. “This is not right.” “That’s not why we came.” “This is not what we are here for.” “Who are you to interrupt this?” Whooo . . .

Yeah. It’s that kind of interruption, because Jairus, the head of the synagogue, had come to beg Jesus for help. And Jesus was on the way to do that and *suddenly* everything stops and something else takes precedent. A woman who had suffered for 12 years, who had been told by her *religious community* that she had no place among them: *That’s* what interrupted Jesus.

Have you ever watched how things are going and known that something has to interrupt this craziness? *That’s* the interruption we’re talking about. She reaches out and just touches the hem of

² Bill Gaither, 1963. First recorded by Doug Oldham (1964), the Bill Gaither Trio (1964), and The Imperials (1965), then by many others including Elvis Presley (1971). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/He_Touched_Me (song) accessed 8/25/2016

his garment. But make no mistake: that touch itself was supposed to make whoever you touched unclean.

Have you ever felt like that, too? That your story somehow doesn't matter? That if you tell the *whole truth*, somehow your community will no longer find a place for you – in fact, your *religious* community might be the first to tell you “You don't belong.” That's the story we're talking about.

Or if you want to talk about it in other terms, imagine you live in a world where thousands are fleeing from war-torn countries for their lives, trying to escape any way they can, trying to find a new life by risking everything they have.- And the world turns its back. “We can't be interrupted. We can't stop. There are important things to do.” Imagine you're on the way to the swimming pool to watch Michael Phelps swim and suddenly you are interrupted by a refugee from Syria who is in the pool and you listen to her story. Two years ago she was in one of those boats. Two years ago that boat started to sink. And she and her sister and another refugee jumped – jumped! – out of the boat and started pushing it *miles* to shore. *Over two hours*. And Yusra Mardini says there in that water it was quite hard to think that you are a swimmer and you might end up dying in the water.

You were going to watch Michael Phelps win a gold. But this story stopped you. Instead you watched a Syrian swimmer win her heat and place fortieth out of 40 swimmers overall. She didn't advance. But let us ever forget how she touched us, how she stopped us. Didn't you feel the power go from your heart to hers and back again? The stories of these Olympic refugees, they are stories of interruption. And for a moment our world has stopped to listen to those stories, to learn those names.

I love the story of Syrian swimmer Rami Anis. He says when he was swimming, he finished last, but he heard the crowd when he came up out of that pool cheering for *him!* “I want to make the moment last as long as it will,” he says.

You know there are ten competitors on that Olympic Refugee Team, and not all of them have competed yet, but those who have have finished pretty much in the back of the race, and yet there they are. There are their names; there are their stories. “I would have been a child soldier but I fled. And now here I am at the Olympics.”

Maybe the story or the words of Angelina Nadai Lohalith are the words that have touched me the most. She escaped the Sudan civil war, and she says of her Olympic running, “It will inspire other refugees, because wherever they are they will see that they are not just the ‘other people.’”³ Maybe “It will inspire other refugees because wherever they are they will see that they are not just the ‘other people.’”

You know, whatever you want to make of this story of Jesus, understand that first it is an interruption and second it is a reversal of what matters most. And you out there, if you have been told that your story doesn't matter, please know that in the Kingdom of God, your story matters deeply. And in fact, it is more than an interruption; it is a moment of power. And for those of us who might feel frustrated with the interruptions, let us remember this, too, that this Jesus that we are trying to follow is all about interruptions, all about stopping and turning and going the other way, all about hearing the story that the whole crowd says doesn't matter. This is a Jesus you can tell the whole truth to. And

³ <http://www.bbc.com/sport/olympics/37037273>. Accessed 9/7/2015.

the story continues, doesn't it? It doesn't stop with the one on the margin. It reaches all the way in to the home of the head of the synagogue. There are two healings in this story, as if to tell us "There is enough." There is enough! Wherever you are on this journey, whoever you are in this community, your story matters, your wholeness matters. Even if it feels for a moment as if your moment was interrupted, don't worry. Jesus has your hand, too. Jesus will touch you as well.

So I go back to sitting three-quarters of the way back in the pews as a high school kid, not even understanding what this song was about. But it turned out I didn't have to understand it. Even as I was reaching out to touch the shoulder of my best friend or the stranger sitting in front of me, ah, wasn't Jesus reaching out to touch me?

And now, fifty years later, I have learned the truth, the *whole* truth of God's presence, of God's touch. It's for me, all of me. And it's for you, all of you. And it's for us, for the refugees, and for the hungry, and for those who have been told they don't belong or they have no place. It's for anyone who has been excluded and it creates a community that *nothing* can stop.

At the end of this story Mark uses a word that he is not going to use again in the gospel until the very end. At the end of this story, the crowd is *amazed*. That happens again. It happens the very end. Because our story is a story of life. Not to imagine or dismiss the tragedy of the loss of a child, but to celebrate a wholeness in community that is for everyone.

"He touched me and made me whole."

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2016/09/07/2016