



Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Ven Moses Thabethe



Sunday 27 June 2021

READINGS

Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

Healing of Jairus's Daughter

In our lectionary reading of the Gospel we are presented with a story of two women: one, is a young girl on her deathbed, with a father who has some social standing and is able to intercede for her before Jesus. The other is a poor woman who has been bleeding for twelve years. Her condition had rendered her ritually unclean, which means she can't enter the synagogue, the place of worship for her religious community. She can't touch or be touched by anyone without making them unclean, too. By the time she approaches Jesus, she had spent every penny she owns and yet her condition had only worsened. The woman's very condition has become a source of isolation and embarrassment – she had become an outcast and lonely due to these religious taboos.

At the heart of these two stories, is the unspoken issue of ritual impurity and the devastating effects that it had, especially on women: where one could be in a state of being "unclean" and therefore, cut off from the ordinary, interpersonal relationships with fellow community members. It is actually from these biblical examples, that John Wesley's well-known comment, "Cleanliness is next to godliness," arose. He believed and argued that cleanliness is somehow related to what God is like and that personal hygiene has a spiritual dimension. This was the belief of our Biblical characters in the Gospel story.

The crowd who gather around Jesus by the lake come to learn what the Kingdom of God is like not through a sermon or lecture, but by seeing what Jesus does as he approaches people in need with gentleness, care, loving pastoral attention. To get back to the Gospel story:

Jairus is a respected provincial leader of the day. He shows what true worship is when he throws himself at the feet of Jesus. He prays and begs Jesus on behalf of his sick and dying daughter for healing. His young girl had fallen ill and he entreats Jesus to come and heal her but as we learn, she dies too soon. This story is interrupted by another event:

By this time, the large crowd is pressing in on Jesus. They really want to see what he is about and we who look into this story are surprised to learn who becomes the focus of attention within this crowd? Too often in a crowd, it is those who get to the front first, who have the loudest voices, who are heard, whose demands are met.

But in this case, though, it is not the loud and the proud, the rich or the famous, who grab the attention of Christ – it is another weak, neglected impoverished, overlooked and sick woman. She knows she has no business mingling with the crowds and defiling them with her presence. She knows she's forbidden to touch other people. She knows that even her fingertips on Jesus's cloak will defile him. But she touches him, anyway. In the process, she gets healed. But look at what Christ does for her. Jesus pauses his teaching ministry to bring her into the light by asking that simple question: "Who touched me?" By saying this, Jesus doesn't allow the woman to simply slip away into obscurity, he invites her to tell her story, to find her voice and speak confidently about her personal circumstances of isolation and ridicule. In giving her a voice, he practically restores her dignity and connects her with a community that had shunned her for years!

And when he realises what has happened in her life, he calls her 'Daughter.' He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

In a society where men had the only voices, where to have a full place in society was to be known as a Son of Israel, she is now called 'Daughter.' She too has a full and equal place in society, she is commended for her faith, she is restored personally and communally, she is offered healing, and she is also offered peace. From now on she can be at one with herself, with her society, with the world and with God.

Just as we recover from this encounter, there is another interruption: Poor Jairus and his daughter appears to have been forgotten. Jairus is informed by some servants that his daughter has died (5:35) and therefore, he need not trouble Jesus any further.

Jesus, with just his three closest friends – Peter, James and John ... the three disciples who would soon witness the Transfiguration – goes directly to the house of the dying girl, where her family and neighbours are in the greatest distress. With her mother and father by his side, Jesus said to her, "Get up." And, she did. And, he said to feed her something. And, they did.

In the middle of the story of Jairus's daughter, Christ uses the word daughter to describe a woman who has no man to speak up for her, presumably a widow who has lost her money, her status and her place in society, lost being considered a Daughter of God along with the other children of God.

Good news for women?

The Gospel is Good News for women like these two women. On a personal and communal level, we are called to ponder our religious and cultural understandings of disease, particularly chronic illness. These are often the pains and frustrations that define the daily realities of people's lives.

On a religious level, our churches are therefore, called to become places of restoration and wholeness, places of transformative love that can revive drooping spirits to spring up with life.

Our task therefore, is to discover what hierarchies, taboos, and skepticisms stand in the way of God bringing life and wholeness to others in our midst. May we find the courage to see with the eyes of mercy as Jesus did.

Amen