

Crossing Boundaries

Psalm 130

Mark 5: 21-43

June 28, 2009

United Memorial

Will you join me in a moment of prayer?

O God, whom we come to know through stories both ancient and new, bless us with love and understanding as together we hear your word for us today. Amen.

When old friends get together, stories are often shared... even when the gathering is because of a death, stories are shared that bring both tears and laughter.

Often one person starts to tell a story and that reminds someone of another story.

And perhaps one story gets interrupted, and it is not until that person finishes that you get a chance to finish yours.

That is sort of what today's gospel reading is like.

Mark is considered to be the earliest gospel written, about 60-70 years after Jesus death.

It is the shortest of the gospels and it always sounds rushed.

Two of the most common phrases in the gospel of Mark are 'immediately' and 'at once.'

As if Jesus was always in a hurry.

Just as the writer of Mark seemed to be in a hurry to record all that could be remembered of Jesus brief years of ministry.

Can't you just picture the writer of Mark's gospel sitting around with some of the members of the early church?

They are trying to remember all of the stories that Jesus told.

They are trying to remember the events of his life.

They are trying to imagine what it might have been like to be in his presence.

And in this section, perhaps one person starts with retelling how Jairus, one of the leaders of the synagogue came to Jesus seeking healing for his 12 year old daughter.

But!

Before he barely begins that story, someone else interrupts with a story of a woman who had been bleeding for 12 year...

And can't you just picture the person trying to write it down becoming impatient: "One story at a time, one story at a time, I can't write that fast!"

So what we have today, in this gospel, is a story tucked inside another story.

Two healing stories, perhaps even, miraculous stories....

Two stories of faith....

Two stories of crossing boundaries....

So let's start with the story of the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years.

We don't know if she was married, or had children, or what sort of social status she had.

As so often is the case in our Bible, she isn't even named.

What we do know is she probably tried everything... many doctors... probably some better than others... every possible way of stopping the bleeding, to no avail.

It may be hard for us to imagine the taboos and restrictions that were associated with blood in those days.

Coming into contact with any sort of blood made one ritually unclean, and menstruating women were excluded from everyday activities and contact with others.

They had a separate tent that they spent those days of the month in.

So, in the communal life of those days, everyone would know when a woman was menstruating.

And so, in the customs of that time, unclean and not fit for human interaction.

This unnamed woman would have not been touched by anyone in those twelve years.

Imagine, twelve years without the comfort of a hug... of social activities... of conversation.

She may have become the object of pity and ridicule, and again, in that time, sickness was considered to be punishment for your sins.

So there would be no compassion for her, or her family, if she indeed had any.

Imagine her desperation... much like that of the psalmist...

Out of the depths have I called to you. O God, hear my cry! Let your ears be attentive to my plea for mercy.

Imagine her loneliness...

Imagine her courage...

Yes, courage!

She had heard of this Jesus, one who had healing powers.

Even though there always seemed to be a crowd around him...

Some of whom would know her and try and force her away.

Even though some of the leaders of the synagogue were upset with him...

She was determined to try and get to him.

Hoping perhaps just to be able to touch his clothes.

She crossed boundaries, the socially constructed boundaries of her time, which forbade her to come into contact with anyone while she was bleeding, and that forbade her from speaking with or touching a man who wasn't of her family.

As soon as she touched his clothes, she felt the healing begin...

And he felt her touch... and wanted to know who had touched him....

With terror in her heart, she confessed...

He too, crossed the socially constructed boundaries of his time.

And responded with love and compassion... as he always displayed to those who were excluded.

Jairus also crossed boundaries, although his were of another sort.

His were not the boundaries of marginalization and exclusion.

His were the boundaries of status and power.

And yet he too, came to Jesus because his 12 year old daughter was dying.
He must have loved this daughter dearly to risk ridicule from his peers that he would seek help from Jesus.

Loves in a way which would be unusual in that time and culture.

Girl children were barely ranked above slaves and animals.

Yet Jairus dared to ask for healing.

And Jesus entered the house where the girl lay, apparently dead, and told her to rise and she did.

Just as Jesus was unconcerned about the low status of the woman, he was unconcerned about the high status of the synagogue leader.

He is unconcerned about becoming ritually unclean by touching a bleeding woman and a dead child.

Rather, he saw a hurting woman and man, children of God, looking for healing.

In both stories, Jesus says something about their faith, that it has made them well.

I have difficulties with that statement, because it can lead to the kind of thinking that if you only had enough faith, then nothing bad would ever happen to you.

And we all know that is not the case.

But perhaps it is their faith in Jesus, in crossing the social boundaries, that is the real healing in the story.

They have faith, even when it goes against everything that their world dictates; they have faith that Jesus has something to offer them.

Jesus offers them inclusion.

Inclusion in their society, inclusion in the realm of God.

What are the socially constructed boundaries that we are called to question and cross in Jesus name?

How are we to offer and receive healing for a hurting world and ourselves?

Each of us will have different things that will challenge us, different boundaries.

And while I don't like to boil it down to the simplistic question of "What would Jesus do?" there is some merit in that question.

Given all that we know of Jesus, from this story and from others in which he eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners, in which he gathers together all manner of outcasts and marginalized people.

What would Jesus do with the socially constructed boundaries of our time?

I have often thought about race and or ethnicity as some of the socially constructed boundaries in our time...

People who are visibly different from us... but this time, I realized that none of the people in this reading is different in this way... they are all Jews...

Jesus' ministry did extend beyond the Jews, but not in this story...

So, who is it that is excluded in our communities?

Those who look just like us, who sound just like us, but those, for whatever reason, are not part of the community.

Maybe it is our next door neighbour, with whom we never exchange more than pleasantries...

Maybe it is a supervisor who appears to not need anyone...

Maybe it is those who have few economic resources...

Maybe it is the person sitting in the next pew...

Maybe we have to reach out our hands and draw the circle wide...

Or maybe we are the one who is excluded...

Maybe we have to reach out in faith and touch the hem of that garment...

Faith offers us a light in the darkness.

Faith offers us companionship on the journey.

Faith offers us an abiding presence, in the good times and in the bad.

And we are the instruments of that faith.

Let us offer his faith, let us receive his faith, let us live his faith

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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