

5th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 6.27.21

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have.

I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.”

Mark 5:21-43

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 he 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 hemorrhage 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 of your disease.”

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. Then 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 girl, 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. (707)

I have a few weddings in the works these days. I've been meeting with couples, hearing about their lives. In this practice of pre-marital counseling, I have each one in the couple tell me who they are, and then tell me who together they are, and then tell me who their people are. Are they from big families, or small? Are they from big friend groups, or no friend groups? Whose children are they, whose siblings, whose parents are they, or whose parents do they imagine they might one day be?

Who holds you in mind, in other words? Who holds you in mind—and is it a friendly holding, or a hostile one, or (most likely) a bit of both?

I do this with an eye for the moment in the service when each member of the couple has stated their intention to the other: "Will you take this person to be your lawfully wedded wife or husband or spouse or partner?" Then comes the moment when the question comes to the congregation, the gathered body of witnesses: "Congregation, as friends and family members of this couple, you are gathered as loving witnesses to these promises they've stated. As such, do you promise to serve this couple with your continued love and support for the sake of their marriage, that what God has brought together no one shall tear asunder?"

I can't remember where I picked up this practice—to ask the congregation its intent as regards this new couple. Maybe I read it in a book of wedding liturgies. Maybe I attended a wedding where this was done. Maybe I thought of it myself, fruit of the move from Cambridge and divinity school to Lenox and adulthood. I'd had some really good friends in divinity school, people with whom I was close at the time I'd met Jesse, most of whom were then present at our wedding; and it was the first time I could be said to have a group of friends. When we moved out here, Jesse and I, and I knew no one, and where making friends would be more difficult than it was in divinity school, I felt that lack most immediately in my marriage. We just didn't have people rooting for the two of us.

It matters who your people are. It matters how they hold you and bear you up—or don't.

This story of Jesus is about the church—who would be his people, and who wouldn't.

Mark doesn't usually present us with much of a church. This gospel narrative is much less about what gathered body Jesus would generate. For that, you have to read the Gospel of Matthew, the only one to speak of an *ekklesia*, an assembly or church. To a lesser degree you can find it in Luke, a gathering of witnesses moved by the Holy Spirit to preach and baptize new believers. In

John, we meet an embattled minority, a tight group often locked together in a room. As for Mark, here we tend to find Jesus as a singular figure, someone who alone had an immediate effect, and whose friends and followers were as often frightened obstacles to the work of the gospel as they were collaborators in the effort to usher in the reign of God.

Mark's remembering of Jesus is largely of a figure alone in the world.

This story, though, is as a tale of two gatherings, one who pressed on Jesus their hope and expectation of great power and good news, and the other who discouraged him, laughed at him.

It matters who your people are, how your people hold you and bear you up—or don't.

The style of this story is typical of Mark, a story folded into a story, this so they might interpret one another—as contrasts or as parallels. When you encounter a Markan sandwich like this one, you look for how each story helps in understanding the other story.

This Markan sandwich is in sum a story of two gatherings—one that brings hope and expectation, one that brings discouragement and scoffing.

It's also a story of two daughters—one twelve years of age, one twelve years of suffering, her power flowing out of her to powerlessness. Her hemorrhage made it so she was perpetually infertile and perpetually unclean, unable to join in the life of her community.

Jesus is back on the Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee.

He had been there, as we remembered last week. But then he set out to sail across the sea to the other side, the gentile side. On his way, a storm arose. But once the windstorm had settled, and Jesus and his friends had made it safely to the other side, they were in Gerasa, a gentile town.

[We skipped the story that took place in Gerasa; the lectionary had us skip over it. But it bears weight here.

In Gerasa, Jesus came upon a man who was suffering a terrible possession, a legion within this man who had him living among the tombs and scratching himself with stones. Upon encountering Jesus, the legion recognized him, fled from him and from the man—the man who was now left to himself, come to his right mind. And he wanted to follow Jesus—this man did. But Jesus told him to go home, to resume his life. “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you.”

Let me just say here, I love that Jesus seems to have had no habit of capturing people.

This came up at book group a few weeks ago. I saw the play “Godspell” a couple years back, and I was creeped out at its depiction of Jesus. I'd seen the show in high school and loved it. And I still love the music, chiefly the song we just sang. But its overall depiction of Jesus, at least to me,

skates too close to him being a cult leader, it sees him too much as gathering a bunch of cultists who do little but gaze transfixed at his sweet face and dance around him playing make-believe.

I remember when I first heard about cults. I was maybe eight years old, with my family at a campground in California while we drove our way north along its spectacular coast. A pair of people in the next campsite over had a dog I befriended. Its name was “Too High,” which I could make no sense of. They eventually presented me with a book, *The Book of Moon*. I showed it to my dad when I got back to our camper. “Ugh, Moonies,” he said, and he used the word “brain wash,” which, again, I couldn’t make much sense of, but it gave the creeps.

To be captured by someone, invaded by someone else’s mind: it still gives me the creeps. How, then, have I found such a home in the church?

It came up at book group, where Amy pointed out that Jesus didn’t capture people. More often, he sent them away—like here, with the man possessed of a spirit other than his own whom Jesus then healed, returning him to his right mind, and then asked that he please just go home to his friends.]

He was now back to the Jewish side of the sea, Jesus was; and a leader of the synagogue there approached him, Jairus, for his daughter was sick. Jairus—he actually fell at Jesus’ 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.”

It’s striking that this leader, this man, would be so willing to humble himself so much, and for his daughter. It’s always difficult to imagine rightly how people in other times and cultures might have felt about their children. On the one hand, it seems natural that people everywhere would love their children urgently, desperately, just as most of us do or would. On the other hand, children died more commonly in earlier times, which is to say part of becoming a parent is the likelihood that one or several of your children wouldn’t make it to adulthood. It was a heartbreak, I’m sure, but it was a commonplace one, which makes me wonder whether parents would hold their children at more remove than we tend to in our culture.

I don’t know. Maybe. And if so, it would only be more so when it came to daughters. You had to worry about daughters. You had to find husbands for daughters. There were all sorts of reasons to resent having daughters, if only mildly so.

There was nothing mild about Jairus’ attitude about his daughter. He wanted her to *live*. So, Jesus went with him.

On his way, though, another approached in the same faith that Jesus could do something about the predicament she was in—this woman who'd had a hemorrhage for twelve years.

What made her unusual in this regard is that she supposed Jesus' healing effect didn't even have to be intentional, that instead his mere presence, and her mere contact with his presence, could heal her. His healing power: it was like your shadow on a bright day: you don't have to intend to cast it, it just happens. It's as if his power just flowed, a bit like hers did, reckless, without regard for the timely or appropriate.

She was right. An encounter with Jesus had not only cured but also healed, not only rid of disease but also restored to wholeness.

It's a worthy distinction—curing versus healing. They often go together—curing and healing, rid of disease and restoration to wholeness. But sometimes they don't.

In this world of aging and eventually dying, it seems a worthy prayer, then, that even where disease might persist, we might also have healing, remain somehow whole.

I can imagine such a thing—that there's room in a life for how it will eventually end, that there's room in a life for how it will be struck with sorrow and loss.

The presence of the crowd here: I imagine it as having conducted this exchange of power. The way water conducts electricity, the way metal convects heat, I imagine this crowd, so full of expectation, effectively conveying the power that changed from Jesus to this unnamed woman now cured, now healed.

So different from the crowd to be found around Jairus' house, those who said to Jairus, "Your daughter is dead. Don't trouble the teacher," those who would eventually laugh at Jesus when Jesus implied this girl's having died is but little to overcome, little to overturn. "She's not dead. She's just asleep." The first discouragement would have Jesus pare down the crowd, allow no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John. The second discouragement would have Jesus put them all outside, as if the energy they were conducting was getting in the way, running counter to what would be needed here.

But going outside isn't quite so simple a thing in the Gospel of Mark. This move isn't just about where people are made to stand. To go outside:

consider, when Jesus was first at work, a few chapters back, a few weeks back, and word of it reached his family, they came to him, his family, his mother and brothers and sisters. They did so saying of him that he's lost his mind. But the phrase is more literally that "he's gone outside."

It's akin also to what was said of the man who'd been possessed of the legion in Gerasa. When the legion left him, it's said he came to himself, become clothed and in his right mind, which is to say he'd come inside.

This is all to suggest Mark's understanding of Jesus, that he was someone always going inside and outside, that he is ever remembered to have gone in and out. It's as if, according to Mark, Jesus meant to explore the structures of this world from both within and from beyond, to experience the reality at play in this created realm from within and from outside, all to figure out how to get God in here, all to figure out how to retake this now-occupied territory and to claim it as a place where God reigns and goodness pours forth, like shadows cast though shadows of light. Jesus has come to turn the place inside out, to make it so a world now centered around powers that dominate, intimidate, coerce and capture and exploit might become a world centered around Christ and him crucified, around love and its self-giving way, freely offered to be freely received for its simply being better, more appealing, truer, more life-giving.

By setting the scoffers outside, Jesus established Jairus' house as just such a place. He would give of himself that others might live—power that he could feel in its leaving him for another's sake.

Paul didn't have much of an ecclesiology. Paul, the writer of the second reading this morning, didn't have much of an ecclesiology, a sense of what the church is to be both functionally and also spiritually. Though he spent much of his life establishing churches throughout the Mediterranean, he didn't have a sense of them together being the mystical body of Christ in the world, the sort of place where Jesus is very much inside.

But he was gaining such a sense in his appealing to the church in Corinth that they take up an offering for the much poorer church in Jerusalem.

It was a conceptual leap that the Corinthians were struggling to make and to live out. Why should a congregation in busy, wealthy Corinth give a moment's thought to a congregation in that backwater, Jerusalem? What does one have to do with the other? And why should the one who was wealthy pour out gifts for the one that was poor?

It would take a few decades, maybe closer to a century, to conceive of the church as having a purpose beyond the parochial, and an identity that coheres beyond concerns of immediate context. It would take well into the 2nd century after Christ to conceive of the church as meant to have more global aim and effect—though not for the sake of worldly power but for the sake of saving love. It's a grandeur in thought that takes time to take in—the possibility that a people

gathered around Jesus in hope and expectation might be found all over the world, and that by such gathered peoples grace and goodness might freely flow all over the world. It's a grandeur in thought that takes time to take in—that the conducive effect the church might have, conducive of love and grace and good will and mutual generosity, ought to be everywhere.

We're on the other side of that swelling, it seems. Gathered as we are, just a few faithful souls, or maybe even just a few *hopeful* souls—hoping that the gospel might true, hoping that healing love might prevail, hoping that Jesus might prove worthy of our faith—we're back to basics.

But I'm good with that.

So, let's start here. Let's be a people for one another, bearing each other up, holding each other in mind and heart. Let's be the sort of people whom Jesus would have gathered inside, conducive of love, such that, should the question come, whether we promise to serve in love and support, we might answer, "We do."

Thanks be to God.