

Pentecost 5, Proper 8B
Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15; 2:23-24; Mark 5:21-43

Rev. Leslie Nunez Steffensen
June 28, 2015

Problem in the Text

St. Mark's Gospel seems to pose a question to us about faith: what are you willing to do in order to find healing? Jesus was forced against the shore by a large crowd and a man falls at his feet. It is Jairus. I can imagine the noise of the crowd, everyone pressing in to get before Jesus and to witness in person what they had heard from witnesses all around the Sea of Galilee of this man who teaches with authority, casts out daemons and heals people. For some, they are seeking entertainment like a circus. For some, they want to see Jesus with their own eyes and perhaps witness proof of the stories. For two, they have come to be near what may be their last chance – they seek a miracle. Jairus is one of the latter. His daughter is near death and as any father would do, he will try anything – perhaps he had tried every prescription medicine had on offer in those days. Perhaps he had even gone to extremes, paying anyone who might have an answer for the illness that was stealing his daughter away from him. All Jairus had remaining in his desperation was himself, which he threw at Jesus' feet. He begged for Jesus' attention. And Jesus goes with him. But then the crowd presses in again and someone touches his robe. What happened in that instant? It seems to me that the text has something to say about the nature of healing, underscored by the hemorrhaging woman's experience. The text from St. Mark's Gospel reads, "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 (Mk 5:25-28.)" This woman was desperate, like Jairus. She would do whatever it took to get close to Jesus, to force her encounter with him.

Problem in the World

The world is like that: it throws events at us that bring us to our knees as it did Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman: death of a child or physical suffering that medicine cannot cure. Our bodies are always reminding us that they are corruptible and vulnerable. As today's reading from the Wisdom of Solomon put it, "through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it." We are of this world and cancer strikes, bullets fly, innocents are hurt, and we suffer. Do you sometimes feel like you are hemorrhaging? I read in a NY Times article that "the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church has survived antebellum laws barring black worship, an angry white mob that burned down its original edifice, and the execution of its founder and dozens of others planning a slave revolt."ⁱ The whole of the A.M.E. church history is one of struggle, from its establishment in Philadelphia in 1787, when officials at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church pulled blacks off their knees while praying, because they did not want them worshipping with the white congregation. The Blacks sought full inclusion and could only find it in autonomy and formed the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The church spread across the Northeast and Midwest, wherever there were communities of free African Americans. The A.M.E. Church was integral in the reconstruction era, establishing churches and schools for freed slaves.ⁱⁱ They have persevered despite hate crimes. Their history as a community is one of suffering and persistence. Sadly, the shooting on June 19th was added to the long list of persecution this community of deeply faithful Christians has suffered. As the mantle of sadness and mourning was laid across the shoulders of the people of Emanuel Church, their suffering became the suffering of the whole nation. I think we all felt the sorrow of yet another incident which so starkly ripped open the wounds of racism in our culture once again. We held our collective breath and waited for the story to repeat of riots and violence in another city. The hemorrhaging plague of racism and economic injustice has visited our nation so frequently lately, it sometimes feel like our nation has come down with Ebola.

Grace in the Text

In the gospel story, Jairus, a man with status and power and everything to lose by drawing near, threw himself "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 (v.23.)" Jesus was moved to go with Jairus to his home. There, he drew close to Jairus' daughter. "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 (v.41-42a.)" In the other gospel story, the hemorrhaging woman, weakened and discouraged, focused her whole being on simply getting close to Jesus. She willed her way through the pressing crowd and touched the hem of Jesus' robe. Mark tells us that Jesus was "immediately aware that power had gone forth from him (v.30.)" I believe that both Jairus and the woman encountered the kingdom: God's will for creation. Jesus was the kingdom present in the world, God's will walking among his people. We read in the Wisdom of Solomon, "For [God] created all things so that they might exist; the generative forces of the world are wholesome, and there is no destructive

poison in them, and the dominion of Hades is not on earth. For righteousness is immortal. God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity.” Jesus in the incarnation was that very image of God, righteous, incorruptible, and eternal. When Jesus came near Jairus’ daughter he said, “*Talitha cum...* Get up, Little Girl.” He took her by the hand and the power of God’s eternal creative act – the generative forces – flowed from Jesus into her every cell, and she was raised from the dead. The hemorrhaging woman caught that same power, her desire for it and her perseverance demanding it. She forced a spark of it from Jesus’ robe to her body. She was instantly cured and could feel that “generative” force re-knitting her body and making her whole and healthy again.

Grace in the World

I am convinced that the people of Emanuel A.M.E. Church and the larger community in Charleston did much the same thing as Jairus and the woman: Shots rang out in a Bible study and nine good people were killed by hate. In their grief, the people of Emanuel and Charleston have willfully, determinedly called Jesus Christ into the midst of this horror. They threw themselves at Jesus’ feet; they turned from the pressing crowd of hatred and despair and reached for Jesus’ robe. The shooter hoped to spark a race war, but the faith of the people of the Church have sparked prayer, worship, songs of praise, and a witness to the transformative and healing love of Jesus Christ in their community and the nation that President Obama called it, “Amazing Grace.”

Last Sunday, four days after the shooting, the Rev. Norvel Goff Sr., a presiding elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, said in a rousing sermon, “I want you to know, because the doors of Mother Emanuel” are open, “it sends a message to every demon in hell and on earth.”ⁱⁱⁱ Instead of riots, people went to church and even worshipped in the streets of Charleston. Last Sunday evening people of all races joined hands across the Revenel Bridge during the Bridge to Peace Unity Chain in a show of solidarity: laughing, crying, and singing together. Walmart and Amazon and several states are taking down the confederate stars and bars, in acknowledgement that it has been co-opted from history by racists and supremacists into a flag of racial division. The witness of Emanuel Church has been nothing other than what the church’s name means, “God with us.” The story is not simply about another act of horror. It is a story of a community, which in the midst of unbearable sadness turned to Christ and asked for healing for themselves and the shooter – and their desire has begun healing not only for them but for their community and the nation.

A story that particularly touched me of the healing power of Christ in the midst of all of the sadness came from one of Emanuel Church’s youngest members, seven year old Madeline. “Why can’t the good people teach the bad people to be good?” Madeleine asked her mother, another question that seems simple to a 7-year-old mind but is anything but simple for an adult. “Just because someone is different doesn’t mean you have to do something bad to them...” She asked for a picture of the church where the shooting happened. Madeleine also Googled instructions on how to draw an angel. Her mother gave Madeleine photos of the nine victims... And it was there, in their quiet home several miles from the site of a devastating act of violence, that Madeleine armed with blank sheets of paper and crayons looked on the faces of the people killed -- Rev. Clementa Pinckney, Sharonda Singleton, Cynthia Hurd, Rev. DePayne Middleton-Doctor, Rev. Daniel Simmons, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lance, Tywanza Sanders, and Myra Thompson -- and started to draw.”

“Mother Emanuel AME Church stands large in the picture, taking up most of the page. Flying above are the nine slain church members, with wings and halos, most holding a peace symbol or a heart. Three have their arms outstretched, seemingly welcoming an embrace...(or perhaps like Jesus’ arms on the cross.) (She drew) more than a dozen people who all look different, standing in front of the church. A heart is between each person.^{iv}” I think this child has heard “*Talitha cum, get up, Little Girl.*” Madeline has had an encounter with Christ in her church which has trumped the encounter with the shooter. Madeline has had a glimpse of the Kingdom and has shared it with the world. The nature of healing is that it is an encounter with the Kingdom: “God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity (Wisdom 2:23.)” We need to turn our wills to God’s to find wholeness and health; we seek the encounter with our Lord. This has been a hard time in our nation’s history, but it has been at the same time a great week to witness people encountering God and finding healing.

Amen.

ⁱ John Eligon and Richard Fausset, *Defiant Show of Unity in Charleston Church That Lost 9 to Racist Violence*, NY Times article June 21, 2015

ⁱⁱ Dennis C. Dickerson, <http://www.ame-church.com/our-church/our-history/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Eligon and Fausset

^{iv} <http://www.abcnews4.com/story/29367594/mt-pleasant-girl-on-her-emanuel-ame-drawing-why-is-the-world-full-of-broken-people>