

Sermon – June 27, 2021

“Circle of Love”

Written by: Rev. Jessica M. Townsley

Scripture: Mark 5:21-43, Lamentations 3:22-33

When I started seminary and sat in my first class, called Biblical Interpretation 101, I believe, I remember my professor telling us two things that first day: 1. God meets us where we are, which, in my experience is true, and 2. Whenever a child or a woman is mentioned in scripture, pay attention. Because women and children were not part of the ruling elite, they were “other,” marginalized, outsiders, really, from the priestly and ruling classes of the first century Roman empire. When they are mentioned, it is often on the periphery of scripture and they are rarely named. So when they take a prominent role in the story, as we see in today’s scripture, we know to pay close attention.

Today’s Markan scripture takes us back into the world of Jesus, who is returning from his tumultuous trip across the sea of galilee to visit the gentiles in the country of the Gerasenes. He’s just driven a legion of demons from a man and into pigs who then ran into the sea. In their fear, the scripture says, the witnesses ask him to leave their land, but the man who was healed goes on to spread the word of Jesus’s deeds among the ten gentile cities east of the sea.

The return trip to the other side of the sea, itself, may have been uneventful for Jesus, but his arrival is anything but that. Crowds flock to him, surrounding he and the disciples. And then a man approaches him—a leader, it says, in the synagogue, Jarius, whose daughter is sick to the point of death. Mark does not report her age, but Luke tells us she was twelve. Mark and Luke seem to be in agreement that she is still alive when Jarius approaches Jesus, but Matthew seems to think by then she *has* died, making Jarius’s desperate plea not for a healing, but for a resurrection.

While Jesus is talking to Jarius, deciding to follow him home to help his daughter, a woman, suffering from some kind of hemorrhage for twelve years, pushes her own way through the crowd—she would have had to, you see, because as a woman suffering

from such a perceived impurity and disease, she would not have simply been able to directly approach this man. She pushes her way in to touch the garments this miracle man is wearing, believing that Jesus's power extends as far as his clothing and that if she can just touch the hem of his garment, she will receive healing. And she does just that! She reaches Jesus and is healed immediately after she touches him. Jesus, realizing something has happened, turns to ask who has touched him—to the disciples, this is a ridiculous question—literally *everyone* is trying to touch him, how can he discern one person from another. But for Jesus, it's not just that he was touched, presumably everyone has touched him, it's that someone touched him for a specific purpose—from a specific place of belief not just about Jesus's miracle-working, but about *who Jesus is*.

Biblical scholars Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright suggest that this healing, which, if you will notice here and later in this passage as well as everywhere throughout the gospels, is immediate, tells us something about access to God: they suggest something about the relationship we have to God. These healings don't take place as a result of prayer, but as a direct result of access to Jesus, God incarnate. They tell us, in part, that we as individuals can have a direct relationship with God that does not need to go through an institution like the church. In other words, when you come into this building, you aren't here to gain access to God; rather, you are here to open yourselves to awareness of God's presence. You don't come here to find God, God is already with you here, there, everywhere—you come here because you want to praise and worship and to awaken to God in scripture, among you, and within you. That's why we say after we read the gospel, "For the word of God in scripture, for the word of God among us, for the word of God within us." We are thankful for God's presence in all of these places: here, there, everywhere. This scripture and these healings remind us that a relationship with God is accessible, if we only seek to develop it.

Now, back to the scripture: Jesus tells the woman that it is not specifically him that has healed her, but that *her faith* has healed her. Everyone is touching him, believing he is a healer, and yes, he *can* do these miracles, but she believes something specific about Jesus that makes her healing immediate and total. She is made whole not through

some miracle of a temporal man, but through the love of God incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Made whole, as MB succinctly wrote after one of my devotionals this week, through God's love.

After speaking to the woman briefly, Jesus continues on toward Jarius's house to see his daughter who, we find out, is now dead. As he approaches the house, they can see that people are inconsolably gutted at the awareness that this child is no longer among them, but Jesus corrects them: she's not dead, she is sleeping. The people gathered there have just seen her, she is dead. Jesus hasn't seen her and makes an assertion they believe to be so ridiculous, they laugh at him. But the joke, I'm afraid, is on them. As we come to find out, the girl isn't just sleeping, but well, healed. And not just that, but she's going to get up from that bed and she's going to go eat something. She's going to be nourished and restored to wholeness. And Jesus doesn't impress upon her anything other than that she should go and tend to her immediate needs: go eat something, child!

These two stories of healing tell us a few things about Jesus and what matters to Jesus. First, they tell us something about who Jesus is concerned with: that is, Jesus is concerned with everyone. Not just the disciples in the boat. Not just a gentile possessed by a legion of demons. Not just the men in his midst: he is concerned about women, the unclean, children! He is concerned with Jews and with gentiles. Jesus's circle of love includes everyone in scripture and in our day and time. It includes you. The people you grew up with. The people like you. The people not like you. It includes men, women, and children; white people, black people; Americans and non-Americans; straight people and members of the LGBTQ+ community; the healthy and the sick; the old and the young; the well to do and the poor; Christians, Jews, Muslims, people of faith and no faith. Jesus's circle does not leave anyone out. And neither should ours. Not here in Trinity, not in the UCC, not in the Christian community, not in the communities of faith throughout the world. If Jesus didn't exclude Judas from the communion table, neither should we exclude a single person regardless of who they are or what they've done. No one—hear me: NO ONE, is beyond the reach of God's grace. Not you. Not me. No one.

Second: Jesus comes to those who seek him. Lamentations 3:25 says, "The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him." Jesus does not limit that

seeking to specific ways, but meets us where we are: even when we don't make our seeking obviously known. Even when someone else does the asking for us. Even when we don't explicitly say, Jesus, I'm looking for you. Even when we don't say the words to some magical prayer meant to open the doors to God. Anne Lamott says the only prayers you really need are, "Help, Thanks, and Wow." That's enough. Jesus doesn't need us to have fancy degrees in theology or to be the most pious people to meet us in the spaces and places we go. Jesus knows when we are seeking him, just as he knew that one woman was seeking the living God's love and wholeness when she pushed through the crowd and made a quick pass at his clothes: Jesus knew. How often do we brush past people and not even notice (maybe we notice a little now because everyone is supposed to be so far apart, but in usual times I mean). How often do we see the prank where someone puts a note on someone's back and they don't notice because it's easy to miss those passing touches. And yet, Jesus knew this woman touched him. He knew she was seeking him. This woman from the margins is within God's beloved circle of concern and Jesus knows it.

In fact, all throughout the gospels, Jesus is expanding our understanding of who is in and who is out. Jesus is erasing those lines we have drawn between one another to keep us hemmed in from the them. We like our lines. We like our neat little boxes artificially designated and categorized in a way that tells us who's okay, who's in and who's out. Often, we've put people in those boxes before we even know them—sometimes before we've even met them. We hear someone is other than us and decide, they are part them and not us. They're women. They're gay. They're trans. They're not the race as me. They're not educated as I am. They're from the other side of the political aisle. They're not even American. They're sickly. Whatever the category. Whatever the lines we draw—Jesus erases them. Jesus shows us time and again that he's not interested in our neatly constructed boxes because he's going to come in here and erase all of them. The Kingdom of God breaks down those boundaries, tears down those walls, and in their place, he builds bridges between us. It doesn't matter if the person is a woman or a child or a gentile—if you are in need of restoration to wholeness, God's love is there for you. Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey.

You will all recall, I'm sure, the famous song from the magnificent Disney film, "The Lion King," sung by the fabulous musical virtuoso Elton John, "The Circle of Life." In that song, Elton waxes poetically about our connection as living beings scattered throughout this planet under the same sun and sapphire sky. It's the circle of life, he sings, and it moves us all. Through despair and hope, through faith and love, 'til we find our place on the path unwinding.

I've often thought about how brilliantly those particular lyrics apply to God's circle. Jesus's ever-expanding circle of love that moves all of us through despair to hope, faith, and love—until we find our place.

My prayer for you all this week is that you will awaken to the knowledge that those boundaries we draw to keep one another apart are not the boundaries of the infinite loving God, but the imperfect lines of finite, fearful beings. That you will awaken to the truth inherent in the circle of life and the God's perfect circle of love: we all belong, to God and to one another. Amen.