

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
27 June 2021

Mark 5:21-43

The Deacon and the Priest at Saint Swiden's didn't like each other very much and this was a known fact in the church. One day the priest walked into the church and told his Deacon, "You, know, a mule died right outside of the church this morning." The Deacon responded tersely, "That has nothing to do with me, in this church, the priests take care of the dead." The priest looked at his Deacon pensively and then added, "I know priests take care of the dead, but we always notify the next of kin!"

The plight of the woman in today's story reminds me of the play by Samuel Becket entitled, "Waiting for Godot [Godeaux]." In the play, the two main characters show up daily at the same place, a rather desolate area, only recognizable because of a particular tree, to wait for another character by the name of Godot [Godeaux.] They have asked this character a particular prayer and he has promised to deliver the answer in person to them. They are to wait by the tree. Day after day the two characters wait, and day after day, they receive the same message from Godot [Godeaux] that he cannot meet them today, but that he would meet them the next day. A boy delivers the message to the hopeless men, who have become so despondent by the lack of response from Godot [Godeaux] that they plan to hang themselves from the tree. The hopelessness of waiting for an answer that never comes has paralyzed them into inactivity as they continue to wait for the uncaring Godot [Godeaux] to deliver his answer.

The woman has suffered greatly for many years. She has visited all the doctors and the answer to her problem has not yet come. She finds herself in an absolutely desperate state now. The waiting has been fruitless. The doctors have taken all her money and now she finds herself at a worse place than she was before, in addition to being quite poor. Day after day she waited for a cure, and day after day the answer to her problem escaped her. Now she finds herself absolutely hopeless.

But she is not the only character in the story today. In fact, her story is incidental to the larger story. We only hear about her plight because of a larger, more important (in the eyes of first century Palestinians) story. The other character is a Jewish official with the synagogue. He is most likely a man of means, charged with the business of the Synagogue, charged with ensuring and protecting the liturgical life of the people, and charged with enforcing the purity rules of the Law of Moses. He also has to be quite hopeless about the condition of his daughter. For this official to approach Jesus, the healer, was quite an act of desperation. Perhaps he too had waited day after day for his daughter to improve, and perhaps, like the characters of the play, the answer had failed to be given. He too was waiting for a miracle that until now had failed to materialize.

Both of these characters are similar in their desperation, even though there are

great differences between them. He is a man, and she is a woman. He is powerful and well respected, while she is considered ceremonially unclean and confined to live in the outskirts of town. He approaches Jesus directly, while she has to sneak up on Jesus. He is given a name, Jairus, while we never learn the woman's name. He is free to converse with Jesus and to touch him, while the woman is breaking the law by touching Jesus and those around him. An unclean person, a person who was ill with leprosy or any illness that included bodily discharges was required by law to keep their distance from people. Anyone who touched these people was considered unclean and needed to undergo a period of purification before that person was allowed to participate in temple worship again. Jairus comes to speak on behalf of his daughter, while no one speaks on behalf of the poor woman. He is a person of means, a well-respected leader, and a pillar of the society of the day. She, on the other hand, was a nobody, a beggar, and a woman!

The differences are great, but there are also great similarities. Both Jairus and the woman had heard that Jesus had the power to offer healing. This knowledge had rekindled their hope that perhaps this Jesus could be the solution to the problem. They allowed themselves the courage of faith one more time and their faith became so strong that one risked breaking the law to touch Jesus, while the other sacrificed his own political future to request help from an enemy of the state. The woman knew that if she only could touch the hem of his tunic she would be healed. Jairus knew that Jesus had the power to heal and restore life, so "he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him" to come and heal his daughter.

It is very interesting how Jesus chooses to heal each person. He could have continued walking on after feeling the woman's touch and the energy leaving his body. But he stops on his tracks and looks at the woman eye to eye and speaks to her. He praises her faith; and he listens to her story. More important than the act of healing, however, Jesus seeks to have a relationship with the woman. He touches her who was an untouchable. He voluntarily accepts to be made unclean by touching her, and as he does he makes her clean. He seeks a relationship with her and brings her out of her anonymity. He gives her an identity. He calls her "daughter." She is no longer a stranger, a nobody, an undesirable. She is a "daughter," a family member, someone dear to him, someone for whom he would die. She becomes the lost sheep he was sent to earth to save. She becomes the one he loves.

It is the same in the case of Jairus. Jesus had the power to make the girl well without even stepping into her house, but he chose to come into the house with Jairus. By the time he arrives, the girl is dead. Some of those present rebuke Jairus by saying, "Your daughter is dead, why bother the teacher anymore." Once again Jesus is faced with the prospect of defilement. No good Jew was allowed to touch a dead person, or he would be considered unclean. But he sends everyone out of the room, with the exception of the immediate family and a few of his disciples, and he does the unthinkable. He touches the dead girl by holding her hands, and then he brings her back to life.

My dear friends we must never lose hope. Our God is not like the Godot character in Becket's play. At some point one of the characters asks the child who comes to deliver the message that Mr. Godot will not be coming today, "Tell me, what does Mr. Godot do?" The child responds, "He does nothing." The main character asks the child again, "Does he have a beard?" to which the child answers, "he has a white beard." It is very apparent that a connection has been made between Mr. Godot and our Christian God, by appealing to the traditional representation of God as an old man with a white beard.

But this is not our God. Our God is not an uncaring God who fails to show up. He is a caring and loving God. He shows up, he gives us the answer to our problems in the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Whether we are the poorest person or the wealthiest, God shows up. His Son is the Emmanuel, the God with us. Whether we are the most powerful person in town or the most vulnerable, whether we are somebody or a nobody, whether we are righteous and pure or sinners in need of redemption. In Christ's eyes we are his sons and daughters, we have an identity, we are priceless. Even if we don't see much good in ourselves, Christ loves us in the same way he loves his great saints. Even if we feel small and insignificant at times, Christ loves us in the same way he loves those who are incredibly powerful and valuable. Even if we feel beaten by life, consumed with worry, and overwhelmed by our infirmities, Christ loves us like only a father can love a child, and he can make us whole and well. Our God shows up with the answer, he has the antidote to our hopelessness, he has the cure for our fears, he has the solution to our problems, and he wants us to be well, to be happy and to be joyful.

I invite us all today to rekindle our hope. God is in control of our destinies and our future is guaranteed. He seeks a personal relationship with us, and he is not appalled or repelled by our sin and our humanity. He does not mind getting dirty and unclean. He willingly takes on our infirmities and makes us well. He takes on our un-cleanliness and makes us clean. All he wants is for us to need him and to welcome him into our lives. We just need to have faith on his love and his mercy. Trust in him and he will make us well.

Amen!