

“Where the Defiled Things Are”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau

for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Mark 5:21-43

February 2, 2020 - Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

As we pick up on our journey through Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has just been across the Sea of Galilee, in Gentile territory. Here he returns to a Jewish village, where he is immediately met by a crowd.

Listen for good news from chapter two of the Gospel according to Mark:

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 Jesus, 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 bleeding 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 bleeding 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 trust.” 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.

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

There are certainly times when I yearn for God to be a genie who grants wishes and cleans up messes and fixes relationships and takes cancer away and reverses dementia and cures disabilities and could be called upon to prevent death until we have our ducks in a row and have been able to make peace with the ones with whom we need to make peace. I have witnessed miraculous moments I can’t explain. I have heard prayers bring about power that caused me to quake. I will never deny God’s ability to break into our dusty existence and startle and overwhelm us with a manipulation of space and time that we can only describe as “grace.”

But, at least in my experience, the great I AM is not a genie or a wizard who will grant us wishes if only we phrase the request properly or subscribe to proper tenets of faith or do our level best to have absolutely zero fun in the years we spend in this dusty existence. There are houses of faith where God-as-genie is the prevailing image, where if your suffering is not alleviated when you call out to God, it's because of something you did or didn't do. If that's how God works, I'm not interested, because I have seen the good and faithful struggle and suffer and a wish-granting God is, frankly, so incredibly boring and predictable and exactly what fearful humans with limited imaginations would come up with if they were the architects of the cosmos.

The first thing I notice when I turn to these intertwined sandwich healing stories of Jairus and his twelve-year-old daughter and the woman who bled for twelve years is that nothing about any of it is connected to theological doctrine or religious ritual or proper behavior. In fact, it's pretty counter to any of that!

Jairus is a synagogue leader who doesn't fall in line with the religious leaders who are so skeptical and accusatory toward Jesus. His daughter's life is more important than his reputation and so he falls to the floor and pleads for help. Seemingly without another question, Jesus heads to Jairus's house.

The bleeding woman who, like Jairus's daughter, goes unnamed, does precisely what she's not supposed to do. Her dozen years of bleeding would have made her constantly ritually unclean — and it's important to note that “unclean” does not mean “sinful.” The Levitical purity codes were more nuanced than that. It's hard to wrap our brains around it, but being ritually unclean didn't mean you did anything wrong. In fact, you may have done something good and important, like creating new life or providing the great blessing of helping a loved one move from life to death.

That said, her presence in the crowd was not proper, according to her faith. She likely had been forced to the margins with such a chronic state of uncleanness. In a crowd like this, she could make others impure. In touching Jesus, she should have.

But that's not what happens, is it? I remember these TV infomercials when I was a kid for a product called “Didi Seven.” It promised to remove any and all stains. Tar! Iodine! Blood! Rust! — my eight-year-old brain conjured up a wild rumpus that could end with all of those stains on the same shirt. A bowl filled with water was colored with dye, but a squeeze of the miracle glop somehow made the water clear.

Jesus isn't made unclean, but instead, immediately, the woman is cured. And he feels it happen and stops and wants to know who touched him, not to scold, not to punish, but to encounter.

Jesus crossed. Jesus turned about. Jesus went.

Jesus crossed the lake, returning from his visit to the unclean, Gentile place on the other side.

Jesus turned about, looking to meet whoever touched him.

Jesus went toward Jairus's home, after hearing that it was a dead body he would find there.

It's almost as if he's *trying* to become ritually impure.

Or maybe those people who have been made unclean by their food or their religion or their blood or their being definitely deceased are the people he needs to meet. Jesus goes where the defiled things are.

Just returned from an encounter with a possessed man over in the land of Gerasenes, he's on his way to a

synagogue leader's house where death is lurking and about to make its move. This woman makes her move and as Jesus asks who touched him, we can hear that the disciples are a bit annoyed at this distraction when there's a healing to be done and time is of the essence.

But Jesus stops and she tells him the whole truth and he says to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." This woman, bankrupted by medical expenses and isolated from society because of her body, this woman he calls "daughter" — putting her in the same category as the girl he was on his way to heal. Her bleeding had already stopped, so we're left with the sense that Jesus's "go in peace, and be healed of your disease" was about something much bigger than biology.

Then word arrives that it's too late for the other daughter, Jairus's daughter. Jesus goes anyway, asking not for a prescribed prayer, but rather "Do not fear, only trust." He comes upon a bit of a scene and he says that death is not going to win today and he is laughed at. With only three disciples and the parents, he enters the house and tells the girl to get up.

And wherever she had gone, she sailed back through time and space  
and into the night of her very own home  
where she found her supper waiting for her  
and it was still hot.

Jesus hears about the world's terrible trouble and its terrible uncleanness and its terrible suffering.  
And thus he knows where to go.  
To the ill. To the lost. To the outcast. To the poor. To the undesirable. To the deeply troubled.  
To the vulnerable. To Jerusalem.

And he arrives and says something like "Be still!" or "Little girl, get up!" or "This is my body, broken for you" and biological miracles happen, yes. But it's not their eyes or their legs or their lungs or their uteruses or their ears or their central nervous systems that he's after.

I heard a man on the radio the other day telling the story of his uncle who died in an elevator at the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. It was very important to this man that the listeners knew that his uncle's elevator was going up, toward the suffering, toward the scared people. He wasn't fleeing. He was going to help.

Few of us are ever in such a terrifying situation with such a stark choice.  
But every one of us faces the option each day of moving toward or away from the people who cry out with their terrible grief and their terrible need and their terrible weakness.

There is the proper, clean, respectable response to all that. And then there are the places the disciples of Christ go.

I have seen you turn down the misty midnight alley, taking no time to procure protection, for to do so would slow you from reaching the one who is calling your name.

I have watched you run against a fleeing crowd to help one you love.  
I have watched you run toward the fire — God bless you — to offer whatever assistance you could muster to a complete stranger in need.

I have witnessed you making your way to where the trouble is, knowing full well that showing up for people means you get the reputation that leads to more people in need finding you. Sometimes they pester. Sometimes they touch your cloak, looking for *something* to break the isolation.

Just this morning on [al.com](http://al.com), John Archibald writes about Krista Manchester and Emily Rhodes, who started a program to feed the hungry up in Florence. They started at a church and there was an important rule for volunteers: “If you serve food you can’t hang around in the back. If you serve, you eat around the tables. You meet, and talk, and see each other.” Archibald writes:

“People began to come, and to see. For six months the program – Room at the Table – fed about 130 people a night. Some were homeless -- the group says 11 percent. Some were old, and struggled to prepare their own food. Some were disabled. Some were lonely. Some came to help, because they didn’t want to say out loud that they came for food. In that six months 1,200 volunteers from 90 groups had fed their neighbors.”

Then Room at the Table found its own space in November, and that’s when everything went downhill. Neighbors and the zoning board uttered that ghastly phrase: Not In My Backyard. Room at the Table has been told there are no zoning options open to them that will allow them to feed the hungry — at no taxpayer expense, by the way.

It is a difficult calling, following this Christ who doesn’t grant wishes, but instead breaks hearts open as part of a much bigger project. He leads us not to cures, but to healing.

Go where he goes. Be brave.

Bring snacks.

Death will make its move.

Go anyway.

Death has only one place it can go.

Fear not, but only trust.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.al.com/news/2020/02/florence-to-the-hungry-you-cant-eat-here.html>