

“Women Rising”

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

II Samuel 1:1,17-27; II Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

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From the Pulpit

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A Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, 13th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Proper 8, July 1, 2018 dedicated to Wendi Winters, Rebecca Smith, Robert Hiaasen, Gerald Fischman, and John McNamara who were murdered in an attack on The Capital Gazette, in Annapolis, MD on June 28, to all the members of our congregation who report the news and to those at The Columbus Dispatch and throughout this central Ohio area who faithful report the news every day, to Jeff Thompson who died suddenly on Friday night at Temple Hills, to Carolyn and Greg as they grieve their husband and father, and to the Ohio Conference as they have lost a valued staff member and friends and always to the glory of God!

*“Women Rising” **

II Samuel 1:1,17-27; II Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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This week's Gospel passage contains two stories that are, for very good reasons, woven into one. Both stories involve women in crisis--in fact, **we don't know them by their names but by their needs.** Both are “daughters” of Abraham. Neither one is an outsider to begin with but both are now subject to the taboos around the mysterious power of life (blood) and the even more mysterious (and seemingly unconquerable) power of death (drawn from Kate Matthews' reflections on this text).

Throughout time, there have been those who have believed that bleeding women and dead girls should not be touched - at the risk of conveying their uncleanness to others. Jesus was not one of those people. He expects us to never be one of those people either.

Let's look more closely... As you know, the number twelve is significant in Jewish-Christian thought (for example, the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles of Jesus). So, it's no coincidence that our first woman has been bleeding (and therefore cut off from life) for twelve years and later that the very young woman is 12 years old. Richard Swanson in his commentary of Matthew says that blood is “*the place that God's first breath is understood to inhabit a human being, the place also from which we give life back.*” He finds it intriguing that the word “flow” could also be translated as “river,” – and

like the river “*this woman's life has been swept along by a condition that persists for far too many years.*”

However, perhaps a better word for her is “tired”. A flow of blood for twelve years would exhaust any person, as if her life force were draining away day by day. Any human being would at least be tired after 12 years of this. On top of that, she is tired of the discomfort and, worst of all, the ever-growing feeling of isolation that comes with uncleanness and all the taboos established around it. And yet Jesus ignores all the taboos for the sake of relationship.

He doesn't permit the touch of this woman to his robe to remain an anonymous, passive healing on his part. He lets himself be sidetracked from hurrying to the synagogue leader's home long enough to find the person who has reached out to him with a touch that is more specific, more intentional, than merely jostling him in the crowd. While the crowd was mostly focused on getting near a celebrity, this woman was reaching for her life.

Jesus felt both her weariness, her utter exhaustion and her deep hope. How could he simply walk away? He needed to meet her – to know her. He needed to see her face-to-face. As power had gone out of him and into her, he needed to know who this was. But, at the point of discovery, he has little time to

linger. But he is pulled away to other daughter of Abraham in great need.

This other nameless woman is a “very young woman,” just twelve years old (that means the older woman has been bleeding during this girl’s entire lifetime). Although her father calls her his “little girl,” she is ready to begin adult life, ready, in her own turn, to produce life through children (remember Jesus’ own mother was only 14 when he was born). Remember also that in Jesus’ time, 60% of those who survived birth died in their early teens. This young woman is about to become a statistic in early Palestine. But, Jesus will not allow that to happen!

An unknown illness has struck her down, driving her father to extremes in his desperate search for help. He’s a person with a measure of prestige, respected in his community, accustomed no doubt to being listened to by people not as highly placed as he is, people without his knowledge and the power that it brings.

Even though this man is a leader – a religious leader – his precious daughter’s illness has weakened him, lowered him to the ground in front of this traveling folk healer in a last-ditch effort to prevent the worst from happening. He is risking his reputation by going to a travelling healing man like Jesus. But,

he is desperate enough to try anything. This man's name, of course, is known to us (even though neither woman has a name). He is Jarius which comes from Greek "*onomati 'Iairos*" and means "*he who will be awakened or he is enlightened.*"

Jesus enlightens Jarius as he takes his daughter's hand and calls her to rise. This very young woman, who was pronounced dead by those who didn't know or believe in Jesus, is walking around her former death room. She is risen!

We see the father is "enlightened" when his daughter is "awakened."

The themes that runs through these two stories of women rising are not unlike the themes running throughout the entire Gospel of Mark. Jesus "DOES" more than he "SAYS." Jesus' shortest sermon is delivered to Jarius in this passage, "**Do not fear, only believe.**" He preaches with his actions, showing, not just telling people what the reign of God looks like. His actions of healing and grace challenge everything and everyone he encounters. He does with Faith what exceptional doctors do with medicine. He heals.

Faith always prevails – if you allow faith to awaken and enlighten you.

So, which will it be faith, or no faith? Will it be Faith, or fearfulness? Will it be Faith, or confusion or hard-headedness or maybe even hard-heartedness? Faith trumps no faith every time. Faith trumps fearfulness every time. Faith trumps confusion, hard-headedness and hard-heartedness every time. Faith always wins over all the enemies of faith if given a chance to enter the arena of life.

I love the expression, **“Fear knocked. Faith answered. No one was there.”**

“Do not fear; only believe.” This five-word sermon was not just for Jairus’ benefit and not just for the early church Mark addressed. **“Do not fear but believe”** is for “all of us who suffer from the human condition of needing to be in control.” The narrative is so sparse and we wonder what's going on in the minds of those in the story: the synagogue leader, both worried and hurried; Jesus, the ultimate “multi-tasker” who might have had other plans but has dropped everything, silently, and gone with the father in distress; the disciples, struggling as usual just to keep up; and the crowd, watching all of this, all of them hoping for something, whether it’s just for a good show or something much greater, something that might change their whole lives.

And of course, what about those two women rising - one who was bleeding to death and one whose breath had left her body? Two women rising who, once healed, would go change their world. Two women rising, who like rising women before them - the Syrophoenician woman (7:24-31), the poor widow (12:41-44), and the anointing woman (14:3-8) – all who stand tall as positive models of faith in the Gospel of Mark in contrast to the 12 male disciples who stumble through never quite “getting who Jesus is.” But, these rising women “get” who Jesus is. Then, they go out and embody his compassion, his presence, his healing, his love and his grace in the way they serve beyond their healing moments.

If you don't believe me, listen to Jesus. In The Message, Eugene Peterson translates Jesus' words to first woman he heals this way: *“Daughter, you took a risk of faith, and now you're healed and whole. Live well, live blessed! Be healed of your plague.”*

Faith risks and women rise!

I see the likes of Jairus' daughter today as little girls and very young women lie dying. Their lives are jeopardized by illness, lack of food and water and the necessities of life, the safety and security they deserve. It is no great leap to consider the plight of little girls and very young women kept in places we are not

permitted to see, on our own border, little girls considered beyond the circle of our shared concern.

Into the midst of such horror, Jesus calls us. He calls us to be the miracle-workers of our time, transforming the world's systems children to be lifted up so they can rise to new life. Jesus shows us that all who are suffering are on God's mind. Megan McKenna writes of Jesus, "*He refuses to accept that human misery and the human processes of begetting and child-bearing, of being ill and dying, put one outside God's concern.*"

In this week, in which 76 women of faith (led by our own Rev. Emily Krause Corzine) stood strong on the front steps of our church to speak on behalf of children and families separated at the southern border, a week in which the Supreme Court issued decisions which will change the direction of our nation for generations to come, a week in which two women and three men were brutally murdered at the Capital Gazette in Annapolis, MD telling the truth and giving their local community and this world **real news,**** a week in which hundreds of thousands of people (several thousand here in Columbus alone) gathered yesterday to protest across the nation echoing what over 70% of America agrees are unjust policies arresting and separating children and parents seeking asylum at our borders – now is a good time to

allow Jesus' five word sermon to sink into your soul - **“Do not fear; only believe.”**

O yes! Women are rising. And with them, children and men who will not be silenced. As we enter our 243rd year as a nation formed in dissent to a tyrant bent on injustice and formed in the hope for a better nation and a better way of dealing with one another and the world around us, may you and I follow Jesus this week— who leads us in faith to find a better way to live and love; to heal and care for others. Amen.

* Throughout this sermon, I have drawn from the biblical reflections on Mark 5:21-43 by Rev. Kate Matthews, of our UCC national staff found on the website of the UCC. Thank you, Kate, for your insights.

*** At the second service I noted that Wendi Winters of the Capital Gazette reportedly ran toward the gunman to protect her colleagues.*

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