

# “Ending Poverty in America”

Lamentations 3:21 -33; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, June 30, 2024, Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, dedicated to Alex Palmer and all the citizens who have been shot in Columbus, Ohio over the past 35 years, to those suffering from poverty in our city, state, nation and world, and always to the glory of God!

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

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Every epic story of transformation begins with a small story of change. This week’s Gospel passage contains two small stories that are woven together into a story about **Faith rising through awakening and enlightenment.** **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. These nameless women are both objectified by taboos around the mysterious power of life (blood) and the even more mysterious (and seemingly unconquerable) power of death.

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. These women are victims of this mentality. You see, most people and societies seek to avoid pain, and stay away from blood and

death as much as they possibly can. Jesus was not one of those people. He expects us to never be one of those people either.

Let's look more closely at these two stories. As you know, the number twelve is very 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" – I prefer – "utterly exhausted." A flow of blood for twelve years would utterly exhaust any person, as this woman's life force has been draining away day by day. She is tired of the physical pain and 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 the uncleanness and all the taboos for the sake of relationship with the woman.

He doesn't permit the touch of this woman to his robe to remain an anonymous. It is not passive healing on his part. He stops. He turns. He looks her in the eye. **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 out to touch him and save her life.

Jesus feels both her weariness, her utter exhaustion and her deep hope. He cannot and will not simply walk away. He needs to meet her – to know her. He needs to see her face-to-face. As power had gone out of him and into her,

he needs to know who this was. But, at the point of discovery, he has little time to linger. 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 (Jesus’ remembers and we must too – that his own mother was only 14 when he was born). We need to also remember that in Jesus’ time, 60% (6 of 10) of those who survived birth died in their early teens. This young woman is about to become another 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 has a name. His name is Jarius – (which in Greek is “*onomati 'Iairos*” and means “*he who will be awakened or he is enlightened.*” Jarius is a religious leader with a certain measure of prestige. He is respected in his religious community and 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. But, this man has been brought to his knees because his precious daughter’s illness has weakened him. On his knees he begs 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. He is desperate enough to try anything.

Jesus is mocked and laughed at by people as he enters Jarius’ home. There, he enlightens Jarius as he awakens his daughter – taking her hand and calling her to rise. She – who was pronounced dead by all those who didn’t know or believe in Jesus – is walking around her former death room. She is risen!

Do you see this? The daughter is “awakened” and Jarius is “enlightened.”

The Awakening and Enlightening 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 rises – 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 – those of us who have trouble facing our own vulnerabilities.

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-tasking" HEALER 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 suffering and then rising – one bleeding to death and one whose breath has almost completely left her body? Two women rising will go and change their world. Two women rising, who like rising women before them in Mark's Gospel – the Syrophenician 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! And once they have risen – they change the world.**

**Some of you are wondering** – How does this all lead us to ending poverty in America?

First, we need to have faith. We need to follow Jesus – who steps into the midst of blood and death and calls us to do the same. He calls us to be the miracle-workers of our time, transforming the world's systems in which nameless tens of millions live in poverty, hopelessness and help women, children and men to rise to new life. Jesus shows us that all who are suffering are on God's mind. Jesus refuses to accept that human misery and the human processes of forgetting, ignoring, denying, childbearing, of being ill and dying, put one outside God's concern. We need to take on the mind and heart of Jesus.

Yesterday, thousands of poor people were joined by faithful believers, clergy, union members and activists rallying on behalf of America's poor near the U.S. Capitol calling for lawmakers to embrace a slate of policies and for low-wealth Americans to make their voices heard in November as the nation's “largest potential swing vote.” Their #1 demand was to end poverty in America. They presented a 17 point platform that INCLUDED increasing the minimum wage to \$15/hour; adding safe, affordable housing for the 130 million poor Americans, stopping voter suppression, protecting LGBTQIA

rights, climate change, ending gun violence and ending hate, division and extreme political agendas.

The Rev. Dr. William Barber, II – with whom I co-led demonstrations and marches here in Ohio and is in my book, *The Genius of Justice* – and the co-chair of the organizing group, the Poor People’s Campaign, declared to the sprawling crowd that white, Black, Native American, Hispanic, and LGBTQIA poor people – who he stressed represent members of both major parties – are one of the largest untapped voting blocs in the country. Citing studies compiled by Poor People’s Campaign, Barber argued poor and low-wealth people do not vote to their full potential, despite making up around 30% of the national electorate and close to 40% of voters in battleground states.

Were the poor to vote with full strength, Barber said, they could potentially elect lawmakers who support policies focused on the wide range of topics that impact the poor.

“Like the Prophet Moses, honored by Jews, Muslims, and Christians, led the people out of bondage of Egypt, it’s time to rise,” he said. “Like the dry bones in the valley of Ezekiel’s vision, we’ve got to rise. Like the ancient vision of the prophet, when the stones that the builders rejected became the chief cornerstone of a new reality, we have got to rise.”

Speakers at the demonstration, grappled with two major political happenings that took place this past week: a Supreme Court decision upholding bans barring homeless people from sleeping outside in certain cities, and the presidential debate between President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump.

Barber seemed dubious about calls for the president to halt his re-election bid in the wake of his widely panned (debacle) I mean debate performance, which included moments when Biden paused for long periods of time or lost his train of thought – and Trump lying continuously and personally attacking the President. Noting an array of issues that impact the poor are at stake in

the 2024 election, Barber – who has life altering disabilities and was told as a young man not to be a pastor because “people won’t follow a man who walks with a cane and is bent over” – suggested Biden’s poor performance shouldn’t be seen as disqualifying.

He said, “In my tradition, Moses stuttered, but he brought down Pharaoh,” Barber said, to cheers. “Jeremiah had depression, but he stood up for justice. Jesus was acquainted with sorrow. Harriet Tubman had epilepsy. People getting caught up on how a candidate walks – well, let me tell you, I have trouble walking, but I know how to walk toward justice.”

Even so, Barber and other speakers lamented the lack of conversation about poverty this campaign season. On Saturday, Barber announced his group would send statements to major networks imploring them to bring up poverty issues at any future televised debates.

“In politics, there is a dirty, ugly, open secret that the word ‘poverty’ – the topic of poverty – is a taboo subject,” said the Rev. Adam Taylor, president of Sojourners. “We saw that displayed in the first presidential debate on Thursday night where the candidates spend more time debating their golf game than they did debating what would help all of us.”

The Supreme Court’s decision was also a subject of scrutiny, with Poor People’s Campaign co-chair the Rev. Liz Theoharis blasting the justice’s ruling on *Grants Pass v. Johnson* from Friday, which ruled that cities may ban homeless residents from sleeping outside.

It is wrong for the highest court in the land to criminalize homelessness, to rule that you cannot breathe in public – on a bench, in your car, or in a park – if you do not have a home.

Rev. Theoharis said, “We can see that our country is moving in the direction where we are no longer caring for the people who are most impacted in our nation by poverty. Shelter and housing is a right for everybody.”

You and I know that homelessness is not a crime,” she said. “We’ve got to stand up and speak out. It is not time to go to church and do nothing. It is time to be the church and get out and be transformers of this society.”

Maria Martinez, a poor woman living below minimum wage spoke yesterday. She told how her whole life has been affected by living in rat-infested, toxic environments which is where the poor in the inner city and in rural areas live. “My whole life I’ve been running, only to find that there is nowhere to run in this country that is not contaminated by the disease of injustice,” she said, her voice wavering with emotion. “Meanwhile, a three month supply of my insulin, which is medically necessary, retails at \$1,600. At the federal minimum wage, someone with diabetes has to work 28 full days full time (to afford that). The child me screams: Why?” She then looked up at the crowd, closing with a call to action. “I look at all of us and I know that we’re the solution to our problem,” she said. “Forward together!” The crowd shouted back: “Not one step back!”

My friends, poverty is eating alive people in our nation and our world. I have no illusions. This sermon won’t end poverty. But saying nothing and doing nothing won’t end poverty either. We need to get out of the church and activate – registering voters, turning out the vote, changing the law and the lawmakers who create unjust laws.

We need to be the healed, awakened, enlightened and faith-filled people of God who will turn this madness around and not sit on our hands and cry in our coffee about the choices we have for president or the struggles of our lives and the life of the poor. Like the unnamed women in Mark’s Gospel, we need to rise! We need to fight for justice, and we need to spend the next five months saving the poor and the very soul of our nation. Amen.

