

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for June 28, 2009
Lesson: Mark 5:21-43

DO NOT FEAR, ONLY BELIEVE

Mark tells us a story within a story, and the two have this in common: they show us desperate people reaching out to Jesus for help from God and, in their desperation, going beyond reasonable or socially acceptable limits. It was reasonable for the man to seek Jesus' help for his daughter when she was close to death. It was not reasonable to persist in hope after the girl had died. Our prayers for the sick stop at death and become prayers for the grieving. King David fasts and weeps for the dying child of his adultery with Bathsheba, but once he learns the baby has died, he bathes, puts on clean clothes and resumes life. Asked why he no longer fasts, David answers, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me, and the child may live.' But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." With the same reasonableness, the messengers from home say to the desperate father, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" Yet, Jesus says to the man, beyond all reasonable limits of faith and hope, "Do not fear, only believe."

We would not say the woman who pushes through the crowd to touch Jesus goes beyond reasonable limits. She is, after all, still alive and so her having hope seems right, even though she has spent all her money seeking a cure and her condition has only grown worse. But we are thinking with our Twenty-first Century Western minds, and this woman lives in the ancient Near East. There in her time and place, a woman did not reach out and touch a man, especially not a man of God, and certainly not when she herself was unclean. Her hemorrhages, her flow of blood, made her unclean in a way we have great difficulty comprehending. What we see as a strictly physical, medical problem was regarded at the time as an uncleanness that was spiritual as well as physical. By touching Jesus, she would contaminate him, which may explain why she would limit herself to touching only his clothing, making no contact with his body even through the cloth. This woman sees herself as her society regards her, as an untouchable.

No wonder she is frightened when Jesus asks, "Who touched me?" She has violated him. Now she is healed of her disease but overcome with shame and fear. Not only has she broken the social and religious prohibitions of her people, but she has defiled a man who is so remarkably connected with the holiness of God that just touching his robe has healed her.

I stress this point about the woman's uncleanness for two reasons that persist among us today, despite our modern ways of thinking. First, the woman accepts her society's assessment of her. Secondly, she lives in shame, and that shame convinces her she is unworthy to be in the presence of God. People are repulsed by her, and so she finds herself disgusting; therefore, she assumes, as does her society also, that she is disgusting to God whose holiness she dares not stain.

Children who grow up as the objects of prejudice in their society become to some degree prejudiced against themselves, whether for their race, their gender, or some other factor considered unattractive, inferior, or even disgusting in the popular opinion. Decades ago, Rod Serling's "Twilight Zone" aired an episode on this subject. Throughout the show, we knew that two unseen people, a woman and a man, were hideously deformed, and the hope was that extreme surgery could make them more acceptable. Only after the corrective surgery had failed did we see that the surgical team themselves were what we would consider ugly aliens, while the tragically repulsive pair looked like our celebrities, our "beautiful people." When people grow up in a society prejudiced against them, their lives are shaped by responses to shame even more profoundly than is true for the rest of us. They may grow self-hating or assertive with an edgy self-confidence fueled by restrained anger, but they cannot remain unaffected, no matter how superbly they triumph over society's opinion of them. Of course, what prejudice does if they do triumph is declare them exceptional so the general prejudice can be maintained untouched by the demonstration of its falsehood. Even then, the prejudice still saturates the praise: "He's a credit to his race." "She's risen above the limitations of her sex." "He's not like the rest but seems quite normal."

The tyranny of the supposedly normal, the acceptable, leaves all of us with some level of shame, which is one strong reason so many people carry bad memories and lingering negative self-concepts from their pre-teen and early teenage years. The awkwardness of physical changes or of not enough change for boys who didn't shoot up in height as soon as their classmates, the memories of social failures, and don't anyone even mention acne. But the tyranny of the supposedly normal is far worse for those who can neither escape nor outgrow their assumed abnormality.

The problem is compounded when religion says the so-called abnormal is also offensive to God. A difference is not just different but supposedly unclean or even sinful, and innate deviations from the presumed norm are treated as choices, despite all evidence to the contrary. Yes, I'm talking about just what you probably think I am: homosexual orientation which is not a matter of choice, and Christians need to stop saying it is. As a friend of mine likes to put it, we are all entitled to form our own opinions, but we are not entitled to make our own facts.

The tyranny of the normal can leave people branded “unclean” with no sane and reasonable recourse to God. Jesus warns us about that: *woe to the one who sets stumbling blocks in the path of someone seeking the grace of God.* When we construct religious standards from the norms of society’s prejudices about race, gender, beauty, athleticism, financial success, formal education, physical or mental challenges, or anything else, we block people from God, and then Jesus’ warning applies to us. Jesus blesses the poor. Did you know that in 1941, the Supreme Court had to overturn a California law criminalizing anyone who brought an “indigent” person into the state, and apparently the grounds for barring people without jobs or other means to financial self-reliance were declared to be “moral” and not just economic? Having poor people in the state was said to lower its morality. Jesus thought otherwise. He made a practice of breaking normality’s religious and social rules by reaching out to people considered unclean and sinful. Lepers were sinful. Women were sinful by virtue of their birth as female. Anyone with a physical deformity or disability, such as blindness, was sinful. The victims of accidents were considered to be revealed as sinful.

Needless to say, such people were afraid to put themselves into the presence of God, no matter how defiant they might seem outwardly. God became a very sore subject. Do we have any idea for how many people around us every day God is very sore subject? I may have a somewhat better idea than most because I see their reactions of shame, anger, or discomfort when they first learn what I do for a living. I see them drop their heads or just their eyes; I hear them apologize to me, a stranger, for not having gone to church in a long time. On the faces of some I see outright disgust almost as though I had something nasty on my face; others just try to excuse themselves from my company at the first opportunity. I don’t take it personally, and I doubt that God’s annoyance is directed at the person who is uncomfortable in my presence because I am a minister. It is what we Christians collectively and historically have done and said (and what some Christians are still doing and saying with increasing vehemence and venom) that fits Jesus’ description of setting stumbling blocks between people and God.

If, as a church, we really hope to grow in grace and in numbers in our increasingly secular society, we must adapt to the reality that huge numbers of people are repulsed, intimidated, or outraged by our faith, and it’s not their fault; and even if to some extent, in some way or measure, it is their fault, that’s still not the issue. Jesus never said the people labeled sinners were not sinful at all but called all of us to turn to God’s grace for our life, healing, and salvation. But we need to be careful that we do not misrepresent God’s grace as a backhanded glorification of the same old norms and standards that come from our society’s prejudices or from biased readings of selected Bible verses. We need to present people with Jesus’ message: “Do not fear, only believe,” remembering that to believe means first and foremost, not to accept doctrines, but to trust. “Trust in God,” Jesus tells us, and he follows that with, “Put your trust also in me.” Amen.