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Marks of the Community of Jesus

Mark 5:21-42 1 Corinthians 8:7-15

Let's begin today by identifying what the healing passages we read from Mark do NOT mean.

1. The story of the woman touching Jesus' cloak and being healed does not mean that positive thinking will heal our diseases, or that we are only sick because we don't believe hard enough.
2. This story does not mean that if we sneak up on Jesus we can grab what we need and he will be ok with that.
3. This story does not mean that if someone we love dies it is because Jesus either doesn't care or didn't come.

I've heard all of those interpretations of these two stories. But, as is true in all of life, asking the right questions is often the most important part of discovering truth. And here the question to ask is, "Who is this Jesus?". We will be misled if we think that the stories are told to give us a roadmap or a step-by-step guide to being healed or bringing someone back to life. These two stories are really not about us. But these two stories do give us answers to what kind of God is present in Jesus and what sort of people we are to be as a community of Jesus.

And when we understand what sort of God it is that is revealed in Jesus Christ, then we can begin to actually follow, love and serve that God. Once we know what God is like, then we can more easily and readily know what the people who serve God are to be like.

We say that we want to be disciples of Jesus, and today we have two passages that say clearly what kind of God is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and also what the people who love and serve that God are to look like.

Jairus, as the leader of the synagogue, was well known and respected. He was the kind of person who would have had access to the best health care and the best doctors. But none of that status, wealth or community resources have been able to heal his daughter. So, this community leader throws caution to the wind. It is the love of his daughter and his deepest desire to have her live that causes him to throw decorum and process to the wind and fall at the feet of an itinerant rabbi and beg him repeatedly to heal his daughter. This embarrassing show of desperation and lack of social restraint reveals his deepest desire – to have his daughter live. And Jesus responds to that raw human need.

But even as he goes, he is also relentlessly pursued by a woman who was nothing like Jairus – she had no status, no money and no more medical options. She doesn't even have a name. And yet her deepest desire is to be healed, and that desire drives her to press through the crowd to touch the hem of the robe of the one who was, she believed, her last resort.

Both Jairus and this unnamed woman are both willing to lay down everything they have in the hopes of getting what they most desire- healing – and as the Greek reveals what they receive is “salvation” – *sozo* – to be made well; to be healed; to be saved.

Those of us who say that we are followers of Jesus are to be marked by this deeply held, persistent desire to be healed or saved, and to be people who know that to be healed/saved, we must seek God. The community of Jesus is – above all else – a group of people who believe that God alone is able to save us. And so we seek God – to know, to love and, to serve God – above all else. We are to want this connection with God so much that we are willing to let go of everything else: our pride, our fear and worry, our need for decorum, our need for the crowd to approve or allow or bless us.

I think that Mark wants us to know that the God who is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ responds to this deep desire to make contact. God responds when we call and answers when we reach out.

When the woman touches Jesus cloak and is healed, he immediately recognizes what has happened. Mark tells us that Jesus turned and asked the crowd, who were pressing in all around him, “Who touched my clothes?” The disciples are incredulous because it looks to them like everyone is touching Jesus. They can't see the trees for the forest. But Jesus – and the God that Jesus embodies – always sees the trees in the forest. God sees us, knows us, responds to us, answers us, saves us. With God we are not just part of the crowd.

Jesus doesn't brush off the unnamed poor woman in order to get to the daughter of the well-to-do and well connected Jairus. God doesn't respond to need according to our definition of worthiness or importance. God responds to our need because we are children of God who have let go of everything except a desire to know, to seek, to touch, to know and to love God.

This story invites us to ask NOT how can I be healed, but what is my deepest, more heart-felt desire?

And that lead us to the Apostle Paul's instruction to the Corinthian Church about joining him in an offering that he was collecting to help the poor Christians in Jerusalem. And Paul's primary teaching here is that God's grace and generosity towards us is always a marker of people who have met God. Grace and Generosity are always marks of those who follow Jesus.

Although it is not clear in the English translation of the passage we read, the word *Grace* is all throughout Paul's letter. In verse 7, our translation says, “so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking”, but the actual Greek word is we want you to excel also in this GRACE. And then in verse 9, Grace shows up again. “*For you know the GRACE/generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that that by his poverty you might become rich.*” (8:9)

God is all about GRACE or generosity, and the people who seek to know God, to love God and to serve God are also to be marked by this same Grace and generosity. I really like Rev. Eugene Petersen's paraphrase of this same verse in The Message, "You are familiar with the generosity (grace) of our Master, Jesus Christ. Rich as he was, he gave it all away for us – in one stroke he became poor and we became rich." And Petersen then continues in his paraphrase in verse 12: "Once the commitment is clear, you do what you can, not what you can't. The heart regulates the hands."

Once the commitment is clear, we do what we can. The heart regulates the hands.

That, friends, is the mark of the community of Jesus. Once our commitment to seek God is clear, true and deeply held, then our grace and generosity will be natural and needs of others will be met through us. The God we worship is a God of Grace and Generosity, and those who seek God will always be marked by that same Grace and Generosity.

This week, I was a part of a conversation with the superintendent and some members of the Richland 2 School Board. We were there to pursue some of the goals of the MORE Justice Ministry to seek more equity and justice for all children in the district when it comes to discipline. And one of the things they said to us was that the Superintendent and the School Board are bombarded by all sorts of needs. Everyone comes to them asking for more. There is a clear need for more. But while everyone talks about "equity" in public, in private, no one is willing to give up some of what they have so that the needs of those who have less might be met. Everyone wants more, but no one is willing to give up some of what they have to meet the needs of others.

That observation – as one of several clergy in the room - stung my conscience. God's nature and God's example is the example of Jesus who, "rich as he was, . . .gave it all away for us – in one stroke he became poor and we became rich."

If our deepest desire is to know God to serve God and to love God, then we must be willing to let go of some of what we have to meet the needs of others. That is the nature of God and is supposed to be a marker of the community of Jesus.

This call to share is always met by those of us who have a lot with suspicion and anger. It sounds like socialism or like free market meddling. Reformer John Calvin gives us some practical and challenging advice in his commentary on 2 Corinthians 8:15 (Calvin's Commentaries, Ed; Torrance & Torrance; p 114). Calvin wrote in the 1500's: "I acknowledge indeed that we are not bound to such an equality as would make it wrong for the rich to live more elegantly than the poor; but there must be such an equality that nobody starves and nobody hordes his abundance at another's expense. The poor man's omer [measure] will be coarse food and a frugal diet, and the rich man's a more abundant portion according to his circumstances, and yet in such a way that they should live temperately and not fail others." In other words, the community of Christ must live in a way that balances our needs and wants against the needs and wants of others, unwilling to live in luxury while our poor neighbors starve, but without having to give up all that we own. Christ invites us to join God in God's life-

altering example of Grace or Generosity. For our sake, God gave his only Son, so that we might not die of our need, but might be met with grace and life and love. We are to live that example.

What are the marks of real Disciples of Jesus? What are the markers of a real Community of Jesus Christ:

1. We evidence a deep and passionate desire to seek God, to serve God and to love God.
2. We respond to the needs before us in the same way that God has responded to our needs – with a willingness to give some of what we have so that others may have what they need.

In this way the real community of Christ is marked by Salvation/Wholeness (like that received by unnamed woman and Jairus' daughter) and by Grace (like the generosity we have received from Christ).

PRAYER: Holy and all-knowing God, strengthen in us the desire to know you, to love you and to serve you, until all of our other desires take their rightful place in your service. And then, open our hearts so that the grace and gifts you have poured onto us may be shared, by us, with those in need so that all of your children might recognize Your Love and Grace working through us. Amen.