

6th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
July 1, 2018
Mark 5: 21-43

There is no vaccine against suffering

In the name of the living, loving God. Amen.

This sermon is about suffering and salvation.

The stories we draw wisdom from today are two thousand years old
and could have been written this week.

What that tells me is that these stories are about the human condition.

They are about universal experiences –
things that happened centuries ago and still happen in our modern day.

First, let's review our stories.

In Mark's gospel, we often get a story within a story – a kind of couplet like we have here.

The scene opens with Jairus,
a powerful Jewish leader coming to Jesus
and pleading with him to save his 12-year-old daughter's life
for she is gravely ill and near death.

This story is interrupted when an old woman approaches Jesus herself seeking healing.

Keep in mind, throughout this entire exchange with Jairus and the woman,
Jesus and the disciples are in the midst of a crowd.
People are pressing in on all sides, clamoring for a piece of Jesus,
wanting to be near him.

This woman who approaches has been hemorrhaging for 12 years.

The text gives us a lot of detail on this woman. It says,
"She had endured much under many physicians
and had spent all that she had; and she was no better,
but rather grew worse."

This woman is desperate for relief from her suffering
and she has the audacity and courage to approach Jesus in this crowd and to touch his cloak.
She must have believed with all her heart that touching this miracle man would make her well.

Or, at the very least she had nothing to lose.
And having nothing to lose drives people to drastic measures.

It worked! As she touched Jesus, she felt the bleeding stop. TWELVE YEARS and it stopped.

For just a moment, try and imagine the enormity of that moment.
Twelve years is a long time.
Twelve years of enduring, surviving, and hoping and in an instant it's over.

Jesus felt it too. In the midst of that crowd being jostled about
he felt the power go out from his body and asked,
 “Who touched me?”
 Was he curious? Was he mad? Would he take it back?
The woman had no way of knowing, so, in fear and trembling,
 she fell down before him, confessing what she had done.

Jesus gently responds to the woman,
 “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.”

Throughout this entire scene, you can imagine Jairus in the background,
 impatiently hopping from one foot to the other,
 frantic to save his child’s life,
 and having given up on physicians or others to save her, **this is his only hope.**

At last, Jesus turns his attention back to Jairus and reassures him saying,
 “Do not fear, only believe.”

A small group then rush to the house where the girl lies,
 only Jesus and a few disciples, leaving the crowd behind.
The scene gets quiet for a moment until they reach the house
 whereupon it becomes clear they are too late. The child has died.
 The mourners are gathered weeping and wailing loudly.

In that day, professional mourners came to the house,
 their loud cries and laments were meant to envelop those of the family,
 giving space for loved ones to safely let loose their grief in the company of others.

But Jesus doesn’t hesitate for a moment. He doesn’t shame or cajole.
 He simply says, “The child is not dead but sleeping.”
 To which they laughed.
 They laughed because death was familiar. They knew what that looked like.
 This man must be crazy. Of course she’s dead.

Jesus enters the house with the girl’s parents.
 He takes the girl by the hand and says to her, “Talitha cum,” which means,
 “Little girl, get up!” And she does. They were overcome with amazement.

Here ends our story within a story of healing
 and I want to point out one fascinating detail from the end here. “Talitha cum.”
 These Aramaic words which Jesus spoke as he took the dead girl by the hand.

Why do we have record of these words?
 Jesus knew Hebrew and probably spoke Aramaic most of the time.
 He probably knew some Greek as well.
 But only a few times does scripture preserve the original language.
 This story was written in Greek and still the Aramaic phrase remains. *Talitha cum.*

This story is true.

It was an oral story passed down and told over and over
and finally recorded here in this most ancient gospel account.
This is one of those details that sticks out because it was always recounted the same way,
like a story of family lore in which one odd details remains forever preserved and intact
because **it has power.**

“*Talitha cum*, little girl, get up!” has power.

Suffering is universal. It is part of the human experience.
And yet, do you find yourself sitting here wondering, why does God let us suffer?
That’s a great question.

In his book, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*,
Timothy Keller argues, that it is only in the past 200 years
that Westerners have used evil and suffering as an argument
against the existence (or goodness) of God.

Before that, people more naturally accepted suffering as part of life.
I wonder if along with modern medicine and the Industrial Revolution
if humanity didn’t decide they were also finished with suffering.
Unfortunately, that isn’t something we have been able to eradicate like polio or smallpox.

There is no vaccine against suffering.

Keller goes on to be “especially critical of the modern and secular view of suffering,
which places all confidence in human reason and assumes that God,
if God exists at all, exists solely to make us happy.

This view helps explain why so many people avoid suffering at all costs,
do their best to manage and minimize it once it interrupts their lives,
and often yield to utter hopelessness when it persists.”

Keller instead promotes the Christian answer to suffering,
which he believes to be more consistent, complete, and humane than any of the alternatives.

A Christian response “is attentive to human emotions.

It views God as both sovereign and suffering.

It alone satisfies the human longing for meaning and significance.

And it is by far the most hopeful.”

A Christian response to suffering includes salvation.

There is a lot of suffering in our world.

Even looking at these stories, we can draw modern parallels.

A father desperate to save his child no matter the cost.

A chronically ill woman whose savings is depleted. The health care system has failed her.

And she has nowhere left to turn.

Do these stories sound familiar? They should.

They are Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman.

They are parents fleeing violence and tyranny.

They are the uninsured and homeless.

They are those living with chronic illness and mental illness.

These stories are our stories.

If you take away one thing from this sermon, take away this.

God is not absent from our suffering. God is very present in suffering.

It is a lie of our modern era that God should wave a magic wand
and remove suffering from the face of the earth.

There is no vaccine against suffering.

God is in our suffering until that day when God's Kingdom comes on earth
and suffering is no more.

Until then, God walks this path with us and God brings salvation and healing.

In closing, I'd like to quote my colleague Grace Pritchard Burson,
for she addresses this feeling of where this all leaves us so well.

"When we are drained, Jesus heals us.

When we are cast down, Jesus restores us.

When we are exhausted and ready to give up trying to follow Jesus
and ready to quit doing the work God has given us to do,

the fringes of his cloak are there, just within our reach,

to hold onto and release the flow of Spirit that will revive us.

And when we are dead, Jesus takes us by the hand and brings us back to life."

"Tim Keller on Enduring Suffering Without Losing Hope" by Gerald L. Sittser

January 8, 2014. Christianity Today online

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/january-february/tim-keller-on-enduring-suffering-without-losing-hope.html>