

“Family Matters”

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UCC at The Villages
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Esther 4:9-17

Mark 5:21-36

“²⁵In the crowd was a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years.

²⁶She had gone to many doctors,

and they had not done anything except cause her a lot of pain.”

Mark 5:25-26

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to recognize the humanity of those who are different from us
no matter who we are.

And however we define ourselves as individuals or

by whatever affiliation we choose or happen to find ourselves in,

help us to accept ourselves and others

as your children who are worthy and deserving of respect.

Amen

In choosing to do Anarcha’s story, we knew this was going to be

another tough assignment in weaving together some difficult narratives

and still find the Good News in the midst of it.

It is hard to believe sometimes how cruel people can be,

blind to their own injustice even while thinking they are doing good.

And it can be just as hard to imagine how anyone could survive

such injustice as Anarcha had to endure.

Quite a few years ago, I worked as a substitute teacher
for public schools in my hometown.

There was one assignment I had that involved filling in
for a high school reading teacher.

I was working with one young man –

and though I don’t recall the specific subject matter,

I believe it was about African-American history.

What is called a ‘teachable moment’ occurred when I said to him,

‘Black people have had to go where no one wanted to go.’

And a smile came across this kid’s face as he understood my meaning

that this was something to be proud of.

Black people in America’s part of human history

maintained their humanity despite the inhuman treatment

by white people imposed upon them.

And the whole world has benefitted by their struggle.

Willard, p.2

Now, Anarcha did have a problem to begin with
that Dr. J. Marion Sims tried to repair.

Without going into the details of her condition,
she was not able to give birth after a lengthy period of labor.

She was unable to work and it was for this reason
that her slave owner had called a physician in the first place.

No anesthetic was used, though they existed by the mid-1800s.

She was given opiates instead just to keep her quiet.

In the course of at least 30 surgeries over a four year period,

it is not clear whether Anarcha was finally healed –

though the innovation of silver surgical thread
was successful in preventing infection.

There were two other African-American women who suffered similar treatment
in the course of Sims' learning curve before his procedures

were used to help white women – and then, with anesthetic.

Sims had been celebrated for his innovations in gynecology.

He travelled all over the world performing operations,

and there are statues erected in his honor –

but Anarcha received no compensation for Sims' success.

And Sims' indifference would be repeated in the conscience-less

experimentation on vulnerable people during the 20th Century.

Not only was there the infamous events of the Holocaust

against Jewish people in Europe,

but the Tuskegee syphilis experiment took place in America

from 1932 to 1972 until a whistleblower exposed the situation.

Poor black people with syphilis were promised health care,

but went untreated even though penicillin was a known cure.

Martyrdom is not something people should ever seek,

but it seems a consequence for those who contend

with a society blinded by prejudice.

It is a blindness that cannot be overcome by anything except empathy –

until we claim the other person as brother or sister.

It is not overcome till we recognize we are really part of a bigger family

than our particular “tribal group”.

The obstacles that stand in the way of diverse people working together

are largely manufactured under the pretense of order,

but often to maintain power structures of personal influence.

Willard, p.3

And things don't change until it gets "personal" – in a different sense.

It's all academic until the theological or political issue involves someone you know.

It's a different deal when you know someone involved.

And that is as true about gay rights as it has been true about the liberation movements of African-American people and women.

And these struggles help us see the needs for other groups pushed to the side like seniors, youth, immigrant workers, union workers, religious communities.

In this story about black women who were treated harshly without compassion, we have the name Anarcha.

We now know of someone in that struggle and we can have empathy for them because they have a name.

We don't know the name of the woman Jesus healed in the Gospel story – we don't know much about her at all.

We know some details with which we can infer or speculate about who she was and what she has to teach us.

Like Anarcha, she had a condition that no physician could easily cure and they both suffered for years – not only with physical pain, but by social rejection as well.

Then, Jesus showed up –

It is a characteristic of him to take women seriously at a time when societies did not.

After she had dared to touch Jesus' clothing which she believed would cure her –

and according to the narrative, she was, Jesus went looking for her.

Her desperate act would have had consequences in that anyone touching or being touched by her, would have been considered ritually unclean.

But Jesus appears not to be concerned about that at all

and more concerned that she speak publicly about what had happened – that she tell her story just as Anarcha's story has been told.

Today's lesson about Esther having to risk death to speak to the king and save her people from genocide

is an example of how women had not been given a voice in the halls of power of patriarchal cultures.

Willard, p.4

Even the Apostle Paul had forbidden women from speaking in church, saying,
they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate,
as even the law says. I Cor. 14:34b

Yet Jesus' words and deeds cut through all that to say
that the plight of people in desperation should be heard and helped.

It is too late to make amends to Anarcha just as it is too late for Gabriel,
But we owe it to them to continue striving for a better world –
and be especially vigilant when civil rights are being ignored
just because someone is poor and powerless.

When you know someone, it's a different deal.

When you see them as family, it's no longer an academic case study.

The Gospel story concludes with Jesus bringing a little girl back to life,
but there's an odd detail of the child being 12 years old.

And this suggests the possibility that Jesus also healed a ruptured relationship,
a broken family.

Could it be that 12 years before that when the little girl was born,
there had been some injury to her mother that would have caused
a chronic condition of bleeding.

This woman was said to have paid for many physicians during that time;
So, she would have been a person of some means –
perhaps the wife of a community leader.

What if she were Jairus' wife and – because of her ongoing condition,
she would not have been able to participate along with her husband
in the life of the synagogue?

What if they were separated if not divorced because of this situation
and whatever support she had was wasted on experimental treatments –
leaving her to the mercy of the streets?

What if Jesus was able to help heal not only a woman with a chronic illness,
but restore her dignity as a human being and her place in her family?

That is a lot of 'what ifs' and we must remember that these are miracle stories
and they are not so much meant to be replicated for a cure
as they are for reminding us of the possibilities of healing.

Many technological advances are true now
because someone had a vision of what could be.

Through the stories of Anarcha and the anonymous woman
we have a vision of the need to protect the vulnerable as if they were kin
and heal our society from the blindness of prejudice.

Willard, p.5

Here's how the Gospel story concluded...

[Mark 5:37-43]

That brings us to the end of this day in the life of Christ –
a day that happened to be a Sabbath and began with conflict
between observing ritual law or listening to one's heart,
a day for remembering the multitudes of Creation
that included congregations, crowds, and legions.
a day for finally coming home at journey's end.

Amen

*Our scripture lesson today comes from Esther 4:9-17
and provides us with an example of how some groups of people
get pushed to the side – or “marginalized” in society,
where they can’t be heard.*

*Women, especially, have been pressured to be silent throughout history,
but the story of Esther is about a woman who spoke up...*

⁹Hathach went back to Esther
and told her what Mordecai had said.

¹⁰She answered,

"Tell Mordecai ¹¹there is a law about going in to see the king,
and all his officials and his people know about this law.
Anyone who goes in to see the king without being invited by him
will be put to death.

The only way that anyone can be saved
is for the king to hold out the gold scepter to that person.

And it's been thirty days since he has asked for me."

¹²When Mordecai was told what Esther had said,

¹³he sent back this reply,

" Don't think that you will escape being killed
with the rest of the Jews,

just because you live in the king's palace.

¹⁴If you don't speak up now, we will somehow get help,
but you and your family will be killed.

It could be that you were made queen for a time like this!"

¹⁵Esther sent a message to Mordecai, saying,

¹⁶" Bring together all the Jews in Susa

and tell them to go without eating for my sake!

Don't eat or drink for three days and nights.

My servant girls and I will do the same.

Then I will go in to see the king, even if it means I must die."

¹⁷Mordecai did everything Esther told him to do.

Mark 5:21-36 (CEV)

²¹Once again Jesus got into the boat
and crossed Lake Galilee.

Then as he stood on the shore, a large crowd gathered around him.

²²The person in charge of the Jewish meeting place was also there.

His name was Jairus, and when he saw Jesus, he went over to him.

He knelt at Jesus' feet²³and started begging him for help. He said,

"My daughter is about to die!

Please come and touch her, so she will get well and live."

²⁴Jesus went with Jairus.

Many people followed along and kept crowding around.

²⁵In the crowd was a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years.

²⁶She had gone to many doctors,

and they had not done anything except cause her a lot of pain.

She had paid them all the money she had.

But instead of getting better, she only got worse.

²⁷The woman had heard about Jesus,

so she came up behind him in the crowd

and barely touched his clothes.

²⁸She had said to herself,

"If I can just touch his clothes, I will get well."

²⁹As soon as she touched them, her bleeding stopped,

and she knew she was well.

³⁰At that moment Jesus felt power go out from him.

He turned to the crowd and asked,

"Who touched my clothes?"

³¹His disciples said to him,

"Look at all these people crowding around you!

How can you ask who touched you?"

³²But Jesus turned to see who had touched him.

³³The woman knew what had happened to her.

She came shaking with fear and knelt down in front of Jesus.

Then she told him the whole story.

³⁴Jesus said to the woman,

"You are now well because of your faith. May God give you peace!

You are healed, and you will no longer be in pain."

³⁵While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from Jairus' home and said,

"Your daughter has died! Why bother the teacher anymore?"

³⁶Jesus heard ^[e] what they said, and he said to Jairus,

"Don't worry. Just have faith!"

Mark 5:37-43 (CEV)

37 Jesus did not let anyone go with him

except Peter and the two brothers, James and John.

38 They went home with Jairus and saw the people crying and making a lot of noise.

39 Then Jesus went inside and said to them,

"Why are you crying and carrying on like this?

The child isn't dead. She is just asleep."

40 But the people laughed at him.

After Jesus had sent them all out of the house,

he took the girl's father and mother and his three disciples and went to where she was.

41-42 He took the twelve-year-old girl by the hand and said,

"Talitha, kum!" which means, "Little girl, get up!"

The girl got right up and started walking around.

Everyone was greatly surprised.

43 But Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone what had happened.

Then he said,

"Give her something to eat."