

“Healing the Untouchables”
The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Patricia Gillespie - June 28, 2009

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

Psalms 130

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Mark 5:21-43

Two women.

Jairus' daughter

just on the brink of womanhood

(12 is marriageable age for Jewish girls is Jesus' day)

and she is at the point of death

thought to be dead already when Jesus arrives

dead and made unclean by her death

untouchable.

The unnamed "woman with the flow"

impoverished by her illness

desperately seeking a cure

she had "endured much"

and it had only got worse

her hemorrhage makes her unclean

untouchable.

Two women

two unclean women

one young, one (we assume) old

two insignificant women.

Daughters were not of great value to the culture of the time.

Jairus would certainly have gone to extremes for a son, an heir -- but a daughter?

Parental love is not bounded by culture,

but still there is an element of surprise in his traveling to humble himself before the crowds--

Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue,

begging at the feet of an itinerant healer.

All on account of his little daughter.

And the woman with the flow?

unclean, impoverished, apparently all alone--

hardly worth anyone's notice.

Put her aside with the widows and orphans.

Two insignificant women.

And here is Jesus
beside the sea with a great crowd gathered around him.
A favorite teaching arrangement--
the crowds are settling down on the seashore
silenced, waiting for the teacher's words
when suddenly Jairus arrives
kneeling at his feet and
begging him repeatedly.

Jesus' friends are worried.
Jesus is resting his hand on Jairus' shoulder
and listening intently.

"Jesus! can't you see they are all waiting for you.
Remember how important your message is--
only you can speak the word here and now to these people.
They need to hear you.
And you are going to miss this opportunity
chasing after a sickly girl-child?
. . . . James, I don't think he even heard what I said."

Jairus and Jesus walk away from the seashore.
The crowd follows.

Hear the disciples murmuring:

"He's doing it again.
Children, women, tax collectors in trees . . .
with all these interruptions how will the people hear
the message of the kingdom?
What are we going to do with him?
Brother's keeper indeed."

Interruptions.

Aren't you glad you are not this man's keeper?

Jesus turns about in the crowd and says,

"Who touched my clothes?"

And his disciples say to him,

"You see the crowd pressing in on you;
how can you say 'Who touched me?'"

Here we go again--an interruption to the interruption.

Jesus had his "Sermon on the Seashore" already written--

and it was very good.
And he abandons it for a child.

Jesus on his way to save a child's life--
and that too was very good.
And he turns aside for a poor and unclean woman.

And they laughed at him.
Hard words.
The mourners laughed, when Jesus, arriving at Jairus' home, said,
"The child is not dead but sleeping."
Perhaps some also wanted to laugh at his apparent foolishness
in being so easily distracted from the important task at hand.

Clearly this is not the laughter of delight.
It is scornful and hard.
Nervous laughter directed at foolishness and absurdity.
We laugh when we are unsettled, uncomfortable, frightened.
When a child has died and we dare not hope.
When we have spent all that we had on physicians
and are no better but rather grow worse.
We laugh at the thought of a miracle.

But some do not laugh.
Some reach out to touch his clothes.
She has felt her life flowing away from her
for twelve long years.
The blood that is life renders her unclean,
and all those she touches unclean.

Yet she has hope.
And courage enough to touch the clothes of the one she
believed could heal her.
She, like Jairus, falls at Jesus' feet.
The touch has healed her.
Not the magic touch of a healer,
but her own touch of faith.
"Daughter, your faith has made you well."

Her touch of faith,
her touch made unclean by her own blood,
has healed her.

Blood and healing.
In the Jewish tradition
blood may render someone unclean

yet blood also has the power to cleanse,
and the power of regeneration as well as of purification--
it is the sin offering or sacrifice of the Old Testament.

Desecrated altars

could be purged of taint by sprinkling with blood;
sin was removed and the impaired self was given new life
when sacrificial blood was applied by a priest to
right ear, thumb, and big toe.

The unclean becomes that which cleanses and sanctifies.
Daughter your faith has made you well.
Absurd, foolish, laughable.

While he was still speaking,
some people came from the leader's house to say,
"Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?"
and Jesus said "Do not fear, only believe."
Absurd, foolish?

And they laughed at him.

The child is only sleeping.

The child's mother watches anxiously from the window
for the healer her husband had gone to find.
The weird wailing of the mourners rises and falls in waves.
Her voice is silent,
her eyes are dry,
her belly is knotted with fear
that seems to twist and tangle in rhythm with the wailing.
She has hardly slept in three days,
watching her daughter's stillness.
Sometimes she can hardly see the child's breathing.
Each time the movement, the breath of life, seems to have stopped
her own breath stops until her eye again catches the slight movement.

She has seen no movement all morning.
The physician has told her that the movement she watched last
night was only a mother's foolish imagination.
When she can no longer tell whether the movement she sees is her daughter breathing
or her own tired head nodding,
she goes again to the window.

The wailing has paused.
She hears laughter.

She sees the teacher at whom they are laughing.
In the midst of the commotion of wailing and laughter,
 he remains calm.
The knots in her belly loosen and she begins at last to weep.
Through the tears
she watches Jesus take the all-too-still small hand in his own.
"Talitha cum!"

The young woman stands and walks.
And he told them to give her something to eat.

Not a message of esoteric wisdom,
not the anticipated, but interrupted, wise preaching beside the sea;
Jesus speaks words of practical, solid advice:
 Feed your daughter.

Jesus deals with Real stuff:
 touch
 food
 blood

For some that is foolishness
For some it is laughable
 that faith is expressed in touch
 forgiveness in blood
 life in food
 and love in a cross.

It is indeed a stumbling block.
Foolish, absurd, laughable

Are we fools for Christ or what?
Come, let us eat and drink together.