

“Compassion and Healing Grace”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, July 1, 2018

Psalm 130

Waiting for Divine Redemption

A Song of Ascents.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,

so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord

more than those who watch for the morning,

more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord!

For with the Lord there is steadfast love,

and with him is great power to redeem.

It is he who will redeem Israel

from all its iniquities.

Mark 5:21-34

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.' So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.' Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?"' He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

Will you pray with me? Your gracious and living God, as we open up your Holy Scripture, prepare our ears and our hearts to listen and to hear. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. For you are our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Our second reading is from the Gospel according to Mark. It is the designated Lectionary passage. And I had actually told Paula to just put down through verse 34. But I've changed my mind and we're going to read the whole story through verse 43. So listen now for God's Word. When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around Him and He was by the sea. And then, one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and when he saw Him, fell at his feet and begged Him repeatedly "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her so that she may be made well and live." And so, He went with him. And a large crowd followed Him and pressed in on Him. Now, there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for 12 years. She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all that she had and she was no better but rather, grew worse. She had heard about Jesus and came up behind Him in the crowd and touched His cloak. For, she said, "If I but touch His clothes, I will be made well." Immediately, her hemorrhage stopped. And she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.

Immediately aware that power had gone forth from Him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And His disciples said to Him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you. How can you say 'Who touched me?' " He looked all around to see who had done that, but the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before Him and told Him the whole truth. And He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your disease." And 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?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow Him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. And when they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, He saw a commotion, people wailing and weeping loudly. And when He had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead, but sleeping." And they laughed at Him. And then, he put them all outside and took the child's father and mother and those who were with Him, and went in where the child was, took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum", which means "Little girl, get up". And immediately the girl got up and began to walk. She was 12 years of age. At this, they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this. Told them to give her something to eat. The Word of the Lord.

But the woman who came in fear trembling and fell down before Him, told Him the whole truth. Part of our Gospel reading for today, the Gospel of Mark. The Gospel of Mark itself presents to us a very fast moving pace. There are no birth stories. There are no childhood stories of Jesus. The Gospel goes immediately into the ministry of Jesus with examples of healing, multiple examples of healing. Questions about fasting. Some shocking statements about the Sabbath. All in all, a picture of an unorthodox teacher shaking up the religious world of His time. But most importantly, what begins to emerge is a picture of deep, deep compassion. Of deep compassion for those he's encountering. Deep compassion and invitations to a healing Grace. And thus, we come to our passage this morning. We first encounter the leader of the synagogue, a ruler of the synagogue named Jairus, begging Jesus, begging Him to come and lay hands on his daughter, for she is dying, is an important man. He is a wealthy man, probably. And I am sure that his disciples saw in this an opportunity to perhaps gain some respectability and take the edge off some of the other things that Jesus had done. He was the leader of the synagogue after all. And he had been begging Jesus. And Jesus simply goes with Jairus, not probably, because of his status, in fact, most likely because he is now essentially a desperate, desperate father wanting healing for his daughter. And Jesus has a reputation for healing. And Jesus shows compassion on him. And he follows him. However, He is interrupted. And as this crowd presses in on Him while he is following Jairus to his home, Jesus suddenly exclaims, "Who touched my clothes?" I am sure that the disciples were dumbfounded and incredulous. "Who touched your clothes? Well, all kinds of people probably touched your clothes. How can you say, 'Who touched me?' All these people pressing in on you. Let's keep going." But then, this woman came

forward in fear and in trembling, and she told Him the whole truth--that she had touched Him, desperately wishing for healing. She had touched His clothes and she was healed. Now, what we might not see here with our 21st-century eyes, is the intensity of this drama. Largely unwritten, largely unspoken, because those in the first century would have known, without any spoken word or any written word, would have known the intensity of this drama. Would have known that it was intense because of the enormous difference in status between these two desperate people seeking healing. And clean, on the one hand, and unclean, on the other. Before the law, the woman was unclean.

You had important on one hand, you had unimportant on the other. You had wealthy on the one hand, you had struggling on the other. Surely, Jesus knew about these distinctions and how you should behave and how they should be treated. But to Jesus, there was no difference. He stopped. Compassion and healing Grace were extended to all, regardless. In Jesus' time, these differences mattered a great deal on how you were treated. If you were a woman, you were property, you were less than a man. You kept your mouth shut and you stayed in your place. And if you were considered unclean - as this woman was - then you were not to touch a man, nor was a man to touch you. There were proper distinctions. But for Jesus, compassion overruled all of these. They somehow didn't matter.

A woman named Roberta Bondi - who taught at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta for years - wrote a remarkable little book on prayer entitled "In Ordinary Time". And in this book, she recounts an incident filled with what I would call "compassion and healing grace and contrast". It was a moment of crisis. It was a moment of tragedy. She received a call early one Saturday morning from a very close friend of hers named Nicole that her son, Stefan, 26 years old, had been in a terrible motorcycle accident. That he was in the hospital and that the doctor had reported that he was dying. And that if he did live, he would be no better than a vegetable. And so, all of their friends from the church, all of Nicole's friends, and her husband, John, gathered in the hospital waiting room with them. And many of Stefan's friends also gathered. And the contrast between these two groups could not have been more glaring. Roberta Bondi wrote and described them, as she confessed that she wanted nothing to do with them, with their impassive faces and multiple earrings, and eyebrow rings, and large tattoos, and spiky hair, and black lipstick, and big boots, and pale skin. Well, you get the picture. She wrote, "I was frightened of them." And she confessed, "I disliked them." Inside of herself, she said she began to blame them for what had happened. "Why did Stefan associate with these people? Why did they live their lives in such seeming chaos and such seemingly meaningless ways? And now, see what's happened?" She confessed all of those thoughts.

But as one day moved into another with this vigil that they were all keeping, Stefan's friends one-by-one would go up to the parents and share stories with them about how Stefan had supported and loved and been kind to them. "We were learning", Bondi wrote, "about a Stefan who was much more extraordinarily deliberate and active in generous love. And his world much fuller of coherently good people than any of us had ever realized, even his parents, who knew and loved him best." "And", she added, "we middle-class church folk were being strengthened and comforted immeasurably by what we were hearing." Yet, the two groups still sat apart. And then, something amazing happened. Bondi reports that some of Stefan's worn-out, battered-looking friends approached them saying they knew that we were religious people. And would one of us be willing to lead them in a prayer service for Stefan? "So together", Bondi wrote, "we pushed the heavy black chairs into an enormous circle and together, we sat. Grieving, long-haired, tattooed friends of Stefan in heavy boots and buckles and pierced body parts, interspersed with grieving, middle-class church women and men in conventional hair and jewelry and clothing. And tightly, we held one another's hands.

And thus, they prayed together. They prayed together reaching across a chasm of assumptions and divisions, and displaying to one another and to the world, the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Love. Displaying to one another compassion and allowing healing grace to wash over them. My friends, when we are slaves to legalisms and assumptions about others, we only heighten our imagined differences. We only reinforce what we imagine are the sins and failures of others. But when we follow

Jesus and listen carefully to Him, we begin to discover the depth of God's compassion and care. The depth of God's forgiveness and healing grace for all. And we begin to discover God's desire for all of us to live together in peace and joy. To reach across the artificial divisions we create of race and class. Of refugee and citizen. Of documented and undocumented. Of culture and ethnicity. Of sexual orientations and political classifications. And we find the faith that makes us well.

And so it is that we approach, once again, the celebration of the birth of our country. As we do, I want to end with a quote from a very distinguished judge from our American history, Judge Learned Hand. "The spirit of liberty", he wrote, "is the spirit of Him. The spirit of Him who nearly 2,000 years ago taught humankind that lesson it has never quite learned. Yet, never quite forgotten that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered, side-by-side with the greatest." The woman suffering the 12-year flow of blood, the leader, the ruler of the synagogue. Compassion and healing grace--that is our calling for those of us who name Jesus as Lord and Savior--who seek to follow Him. Thanks be to God. Amen.