

Sermon – “Something to Eat”

Sunday, June 28, 2015

Scripture Readings – 2 Corinthians 8:7-15, Mark 5:21-43

Rev. Hannah Dreitcer

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first Scripture reading is from 2 Corinthians, chapter 8, verses 7-15. This is Paul’s second letter to the church he founded in Corinth, and to which he continues to serve as a mentor and leader from a distance, answering theological questions, advising on communal disputes, and—as he does in this passage—asking for support of other Christians and other churches. Hear now God’s holy Word.

7 Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you —so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. 8 I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. 9 For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. 10 And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something— 11 now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. 12 For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. 13 I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between 14 your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. 15 As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little." Amen.

Our second reading is from the gospel of Mark, chapter five, verses 21-43. Jesus is far enough along in his ministry to draw huge crowds wherever he goes, and his skill as a healer is now well known. In many ways this story occurs at the height of his fame, for from here he will return to Nazareth and be rejected by his hometown, a foreshadowing of his final rejection in Jerusalem. But for today, the crowd adores him and seeks him out. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.

21 When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. 22 Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet 23 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." 24 So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. 25 Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. 26 She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. 27 She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, 28 for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." 29 Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. 30 Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" 31 And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?" " 32 He looked all around to see who had done it. 33 But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. 34 He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." 35 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?" **36** But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." **37** He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. **38** When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. **39** When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." **40** And they laughed at him. 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. **41** He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" **42** And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. **43** He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat. This is the Word of the Lord.

The title of the sermon – “Something to Eat”

The text: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” 2 Corinthians 8:9

Let us pray: Holy One, touch us with your healing grace that, restored to wholeness, we may live out our calling as your resurrection people. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

I don't think I'm the only one to notice that neither of our texts today deal with particularly comfortable topics. The portion of Paul's letter to the Corinthians is, fairly explicitly, a stewardship campaign. Like a good church fundraiser, he ties in his request to some very solid theology, but he is still asking for money, which is rarely a comfortable subject. And the first part of our gospel text focuses on a story that can most comfortably be described as “earthy”. The woman at the center is politely called “the hemorrhaging woman”. We are meant to understand the precise nature of this hemorrhage through her femaleness, and through the parallel between her twelve years of bleeding and the age of the twelve year old girl in the second half of the text—there is a particular type of bleeding that is connected to girls of that age, and one we are deeply uncomfortable naming. So in English we call her the hemorrhaging woman. In Greek, my lexicon tells me, she is said, rather evasively, to have a “flowing problem”. Like I said—this text is earthy, and the subject is not exactly one we're used to discussing—particularly not from the pulpit. But this story has a new meaning for me, for I know someone who was a hemorrhaging woman.

A few years ago Miriam, a dear mentor and woman close to my heart, spent twelve months with a “flowing problem”. When it started, she tentatively mentioned it to a few women of her acquaintance, and was assured that such a problem is a normal part of menopause. Yet this flowing problem was relentless, and nothing could stem the bleeding. Miriam took daily—sometimes multiple times a day—trips to the store to replenish supplies, the cost of which quickly added up. Over the months she stopped going out with friends, and began working from home, afraid of embarrassing public accidents. She began sleeping in a bed separate from her husband, and soon stopped sleeping much at all, as her bandages filled with blood on an almost hourly basis. She was the hemorrhaging woman, isolated and alone.

She lost strength and energy, and became incapable of walking across her house in a single trip. Eventually, the simple act of standing up left her exhausted and out of breath. And worst of all,

she says now, was her sense of profound silence and shame, for her flowing problem was one that made everyone uncomfortable.

Two thousand years ago Miriam's sister in silence, the unnamed woman of our text, bled for 12 years in a way no one cares to discuss. For 12 years she spent all her money on physicians and supplies. For 12 years she lost energy and strength. For 12 years she withdrew from society, from family, for fear of embarrassment. For 12 years she was ritually impure, denied access to worship spaces. And she is left weak, impoverished, alone, and full of shame.

It is telling, I think, that this woman, out of all the people healed by Christ, sneaks up to him and hopes to be healed without being noticed. In every other healing story I can think of, people shout out to Jesus for help, either for themselves or someone else. People make themselves heard and seen, again and again. Bartimeaus shouts over the crowd for his sight to be restored, the paralytic's friends commit serious property damage to get him to Jesus, and Jairus pushes through the crowd and begs repeatedly for Jesus to save his daughter. Even the ten lepers shout for attention and healing from the proscribed distance.

But not this woman. She longs for healing as much as anyone else, yet she alone hopes to be healed without being noticed. So she sneaks up behind Jesus, hidden in the multitudes surrounding this rock star rabbi and simply touches the hem of his cloak. IMMEDIATELY her hemorrhage stops. IMMEDIATELY Jesus stops, knowing that power has gone out of him. In what other story does Christ heal unintentionally?

But he doesn't heal unintentionally—because he's not content to simply fix a medical problem somewhere in the crowd. He insists on knowing who touched him, insists on looking even when his disciples point out the futility of finding one person in the crowd. He WILL NOT LET the woman remain hidden and silent, but searches the crowd for her. So she, in fear and trembling, comes forward, and in front of this enormous crowd tells the whole truth.

This woman who has lived in shame, secrecy, and silence, is called by Christ and gives public voice to her story, earthy, uncomfortable parts and all. And it is THEN, after her silent tongue has been given life and her truth has been told in all its messy fullness, that Jesus tells her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." Her bleeding has already been stopped, but there is more healing work to be done, and Christ seeks her out to do that work. She is healed of her shame and silence and hiddenness, and sent out in peace.

But this is only half of the story, for even as he sends her in peace, news comes that Jairus' daughter has died. But just as Jesus refused to give up on finding the silent woman hidden in the crowd, he will not give up on this newly silent little girl, and goes from one healing immediately to the next. Paul, in our passage from 2 Corinthians, reminds his readers that for our sakes Christ became poor. While Paul is likely thinking of the sacrifice of the crucifixion, it reminds us also to look at the smaller ways in which Jesus gave himself up for us—on days like this one recorded in Mark.

In this story, we learn that Jesus feels power leave him when he heals—he literally gives himself to those who come to him for help, no matter his discomfort. He became poor so that we might become rich. He stayed among the people, allowing them to be near him and crowd him and touch him and beg him for help. Paul's letter reminds us that Jesus was not unaffected by his ministry—that he made himself poor for our sakes, un-comfortable for our sakes, dis-eased for our sakes. And with this reminder, Paul calls us to our own such generosity. And so we must share our own abundance with those in need, even to the point of our own discomfort. Paul

assures us that this does not mean we should impoverish ourselves, financially or spiritually, but rather work for a fair balance, giving a little more than is easy, trusting that when we ourselves are in need, those with plenty will give generously to us.

Miriam was on the receiving end of such generosity. When she finally cast off her shame long enough to see a doctor, she was sent straight to the emergency room to receive new blood, for over 12 months of bleeding, she had lost two thirds of her body's blood supply, and was dangerously close to a fatal accident and cardiac arrest. So she was given blood—blood given by those with abundance for those in need. And as the blood flowed through her veins, immediately she felt in her body that she was healed, just as the nameless woman did two thousand years ago. Miriam felt strength and life return to her, while she watched her skin and fingernails turn from grey to pink, and when it was done, she leapt to her feet and walked, just as Jairus' daughter did two thousand years ago.

All three women were restored and given new life and called to ARISE. But Miriam and her doctors still had to figure out why she was bleeding and how to stop it, because the work of healing doesn't end so easily. And this is why I love Jesus' command to give the little girl something to eat. It cuts through the amazement of the witnesses, the wonder of the miraculous moment, and points us back to the work of life. Because our need for food—for physical care and spiritual sustenance—never ends. Give her something to eat!

The miraculous birth of the church was not the end, for there were still Christians in poverty, and so Paul encouraged those with plenty to share what they had. The miraculous cure from the mere touch of a cloak was not the end, for the nameless woman was still hidden and silent, so Jesus insisted the crowd hear her voice. And the return to life was not the end, for the little girl still needed to grow. He told them to give her something to eat.

No matter the miracle, no matter the victory, when a woman is healed or a little girl is restored to life, when symbols of hatred are removed and unjust laws are struck down, there is still the work of living to do! Out of our own disease Christ makes us whole, giving us new life and calling us to arise, and then he points us to the needs and brokenness of others so that we might join in his healing work, carrying on this work of living. And that work will not always be easy. And that work will certainly not always be comfortable. But we are called by Christ's example, encouraged by Paul's teaching, to delight in that discomfort and to share what we have so that all might have enough, and so that all might know their worth as children of God.

He told them—he tells us—to find the hidden person in the crowd, to hear truths that make us uncomfortable, to seek out the voices of the forgotten and silenced, and to give all God's children something to eat.