

Don't Hold Back (A Sermon for Pride Sunday)
Mark 5:21-43
June 27, 2021
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An authoritative man and an ostracized woman.
A named insider and an unnamed outsider.
A leader and a bleeder.
One who knows he'll be heard
and one who assumes she won't.
They could hardly be more different,
save for one important detail:
they are both desperate for a man named Jesus
to do everything they've heard he can do
and be everything they've heard he is.

I love the Gospel of Mark for so many reasons.
One of those reasons is how many miracles it records
in its relatively brief account.
To hear Mark tell the story,
Jesus hands out miracles the way Oprah hands out cars —
everybody gets one.
Today's scripture reading is a miracle
interrupted by another miracle.
It's almost an embarrassment of riches.

And truly, I love Mark for this.
We need all the miracles we can get these days.
I find myself praying this a lot lately:
"Keep the miracles coming, Jesus. Keep 'em coming."
Of course, the more often I pray this,
the more I am reminded that prayer tends to changes me
more than the circumstances around me.
And the more I sat with this story, I realized,
I don't think this is a story of two miracles.
I think it's a story of four miracles.

For one, Jesus heals the woman.
He releases her from twelve years of physical torture,
the actual pain of a body in which
something has gone terribly wrong
and whatever it is, is wrecking every kind of havoc.
He releases her from the mental anguish of being told time and time again,
there's nothing we can do for you,
or maybe even on occasioning told, it's all in your head,
and the resigned realization
that this is how it will be for the rest of her life.
He releases her from the economic hardship
of seeking physician after physician,
trying every treatment in the book,
from the most traditional to the remarkably outlandish,
similar only in their assault upon her financial future
and their ultimate impotence.
And he releases her from the social pariah-ship
all of the above colludes to create.

Jesus releases her from all of that with one touch,
a touch that isn't even his own.
That is a miracle.
You might could count it as four all on its own,
for every layer of her healing,
but there's plenty more still coming,
so we'll count this just as one.

Two, Jesus heals Jairus' daughter
even after she is pronounced dead.
But you and I know that even death is no match for Jesus
who is the bringer and giver of life and life abundant.
"Awake from your slumber,"
he tells the little girl.
"Arise from your sleep,"
and he restores not just her future,
but her father's, too.

That's a miracle.
A second miracle, for those who are counting,
a second sizable miracle,
and without discounting the magnificence of either one,
I think we can all agree those are the miracles everyone sees
when they read this story,
for Mark, in his incredible and incredibly urgent wisdom,
places them at center stage,
exactly where they belong.
Look at this man, they say —
see him for who he is and what he can do.

But I submit to you that there are still two more miracles in this story,
miracles that I see more clearly
when I read this story remembering that it is Pride month.

Miracles three and four
are that a man of great status
and woman without any status whatsoever
each muster up the faith
to approach Jesus in the first place.

Jairus, after all, is a leader in the local synagogue,
almost certainly a colleague of the scribes
who are even now in this very same moment
plotting ways to kill Jesus.
To approach this renegade healer in public,
throwing himself at his mercy,
begging and pleading for help,
knowing that his friends and neighbors and coworkers
will raise both an eyebrow and a stink
about every second of this encounter,
knowing full well what has happened to others
who have trusted this man ...
knowing all that and pressing forward nevertheless ...
that is faith indeed.

He takes his secure future and his stable livelihood
and places it all on a wing and a prayer.
That is a gamble that only faith is willing to take.
Sure, his faith might be borne out of desperation,
but desperate faith is still faith.

The woman, she might have less to lose,
but she also has to push through a lifetime
of being looked down upon
or maybe even worse,
being overlooked entirely.

Her very presence in the crowd is a risk,
one that could backfire at any moment.
And in her head were surely whispers of the voices
that cried out over the years,
"You are unclean!
You are not holy!
Stay away — there is no place for you here."

Maybe those voices are what silence her own voice that day,
leaving her no other option
but to reach out and grab at the healer's cloak.

If history is any indication,
she has no reason to believe this moment will be any different ...
but there she is,
fingers full of faith connecting with a bit of fringe.

Without miracles three and four,
miracles one and two
never take place.

And the honest truth is this:
there is no reason,
no reasonable reason, at least,
that either that man or that woman
should have had that kind of faith.

Nothing about the makeup of their identities or their histories
could reassure them that trusting Jesus
would bear much fruit.

I cannot help but see a corollary
in the faith of our LGBTQIA siblings.

To be perfectly clear,
not because they — you — are sick and in need of healing.

It is because of your faithfulness to the church,
an institution that for years upon years,
for lifetimes, even,
told you,
there is no place for you here,
no equal place for you here, at least.

Your faith in the redemptive power of Jesus Christ
has been so strong,
you have endured the church at its worst,
trusting that eventually,
the institution would catch up with the one it claimed to follow.

At least from where I sit,
there is no reason you should have done that —

no reasonable reason, at least.
That sort of faith ... it is a miracle.
And just like the faith of both Jairus and the woman,
your faith paves the way for more miracles.

I am aware, though,
that there are still places in the church,
places in the capital-C Church
and places within our own denomination,
where this truth of the gospel is still silenced.

So hear this clearly:
LGTBQIA siblings,
you are a miracle.
Whether the fullness of your identity
is something you share with the world,
or is something you are only beginning to realize within yourself,
you are fearfully and wonderfully made.

As the Good Book itself puts it,
you are good and very good.
You are made in the image of God,
you are a beautiful and beloved child of God,
one with whom God is well pleased.
That is what makes you a miracle.
That is what makes anyone, everyone, a miracle.
Including you.

When Jesus heals the unnamed woman,
the woman who had been but now is no longer bleeding,
he praises her,
claims her as family by calling her daughter,
and says,
"Your faith has made you well.
Your faith has saved you.
Great is your faith.
Go in peace."

And again to our LGTBQIA siblings
your faith may have saved you —
that's what Jesus says and I'm not here to argue with him —
your faith may have saved you,
but your faith has also saved the church,
our church,
our beautiful, broken, stumbling, imperfect church.

You reached out
and you held on —
to God and to the church,
and along the way,
your faithful grip on both
brought the two closer together.

That is a miracle.

It is an unfinished miracle, though,
as we are ever striving toward a fully just church,
and indeed a fully just world,
one that is no longer bound by homophobia,
but also one that is no longer bound by racism,

sexism,
ageism,
ableism,
any of it.

The full realization of that vision
is still far off in the distance.
But just like in Mark's gospel,
it draws closer one miracle at a time.

There may be two miracles in today's story.
I count at least four.
Depending on how you count,
there may be six, or even 10.

The point, I think,
is that they are far more frequent
than we sometimes allow ourselves to believe.

And if all of us in the church
can channel the faith of Jairus and the unnamed woman,
if all of us in the church
can channel the faith of the LGBTQIA community over the years
and in the present day,
if we all reach out for even the fringes of justice
and hold on with everything we have in us,
we will see,
in glimpses
if not in its entirety,
the arrival
of God's promised day.

By the grace of God, may it be so.

Pray with me:

God of grace and God of glory,
we were taught that pride goeth before a fall.
And today, we are bold enough to say —
please let that be true.

Please, God,
Where PRIDE goes let so much fall in its wake.
Where PRIDE goes, may homophobia fall.
Where PRIDE goes, may fear fade away.
Where PRIDE goes, may name calling and taunting cease.
Where PRIDE goes, may unfair standards be eased.
Where PRIDE goes, may unjust policies be defeated.
Where PRIDE goes, may injustice of every sort fall forever.
And where PRIDE goes, O God, may beauty bloom forever.
Where PRIDE goes, may acceptance be the norm.
Where PRIDE goes, may the welcome be warm.
Where PRIDE goes, may love burst forth.
Where PRIDE goes, may justice roll down
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
Where PRIDE goes, may your kingdom come and your will be done.
Where PRIDE goes, O God, may your church follow.

We were taught that pride goeth before a fall.
Yes, God, please, in your mercy,
let PRIDE goeth before a fall.

In this, O God, as with everything when it comes to you,
we believe;
help our unbelief.

In Christ's name we pray,
Amen.