

Journey to “The Other Side”

Joyce Hollyday
Mark 5:21-34
Sunday, June 28, 2009

**A sermon of commissioning for
Susanne, Greg, Caleb, and Ascher Walker Wilson,
on their way to three years of mission work in Colombia
with Mennonite Central Committee**

Our passage opens tonight with Jesus crossing over in a boat to “the other side.” Now, he probably literally crossed the lake known in those parts as the Sea of Galilee. I rode a boat on it once, with a strong headwind stirring up whitecaps, and it is indeed large enough for people to have imagined it as a great sea. And a trip to “the other side” in Jesus’ time would seem far indeed. But that phrase is also used in the Bible to refer to a journey away from home, out of one’s comfort zone. A trip to “the other side” was a venture into unknown territory.

When Jesus got there, he was mobbed. This was becoming a routine response to the man who was wandering the land healing and teaching and preaching peace. One person—a synagogue leader by the name of Jairus—stepped forward from the crowd and begged Jesus to come to his home and heal his dying twelve-year-old daughter. Everything about this man spoke of his importance—he was named, and identified by his religious role in the community, and he spoke persuasively. Jesus headed off with him.

Let me just take a moment to give away the ending here, since I’m not going to focus on this part of the story. When Jesus eventually got to the girl, those huddled around her bed thought that she was dead. But Jesus took her by the hand, and she got up and walked around. She was fine. A happy ending.

But before Jesus got to her, he was interrupted. In contrast to Jairus’ plea, this interruption came from a woman, who was unnamed, and whose reputation in the community was not one of service and importance but of strangeness and isolation. For twelve long years, this woman had bled, rendering her weak, weary, and, according to Jewish purity codes, “unclean.” She was considered a threat to the holiness of the entire community, a constant source of pollution among the people. She was destined to live her life in isolation on the edges of society, unwelcome and untouched.

She was also impoverished, having spent all of her money on cures that did not work. “She had endured much under many physicians,” the scripture tells us. She had likely tried the many remedies for her condition outlined in the Jewish Talmud: drinking a tonic made from a compound of rubber, alum, and garden crocuses dissolved in wine; eating a dose of Persian onions cooked in wine; taking an infusion of sawdust from the lotus tree, mixed with the curdled milk of a hare, calf, lamb, or deer, to coagulate her blood; wearing the ash of an ostrich’s egg in a linen bag around her neck for months; rubbing herself with foul-smelling salves; obtaining a barleycorn found in the dung of a white she-ass. Talk about a need for an overhaul of the healthcare system...

Jesus was on an urgent mission at the request of an imposing man. She was a bleeding, anonymous, no-account woman in a throng of thousands. But she was also desperate. Desperate enough to ignore her excommunication and shame and venture out into the crowd around Jesus. Desperate enough to ignore the law that called it a crime for her to touch a holy man, and to reach out and take hold of his cloak. The healing was immediate. So immediate and intense that Jesus felt the power drain out of him and into her.

“Who touched my clothes?” he wanted to know. It was a ridiculous question. His disciples knew it, dismissing it with, “Look at this crowd. How could you ever know who touched you?”

But one woman knew. And, boldly, she came forward, and told him “the whole truth.” The whole tragic story of her life.

“Daughter, your faith has made you well,” declared Jesus. “Go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” These words were balm to the woman. “Daughter” restored her place in the human family, in the community of faith.

***“Go in peace and be healed” implies that
there was more to be done.***

But these words also acknowledge that, though her healing came in a miraculous instant, it was not over. "Go in peace and be healed" implies that there was more to be done.

So what happened to this woman, once shunned and now healed? The scripture doesn't tell us, because immediately Jairus' people are begging for Jesus' attention again. The dying little girl. Jesus left to attend to her.

So, for centuries, we had no record of what happened to this woman. Let's call her Hope. But, just last week, a papyrus scroll was found in a cave in the Middle East by a shepherd boy. And, astoundingly, it turned out to be Hope's journal. Here's what happened to her.

She wandered around for a while, still lonely. Because even though she was physically healed, Hope learned quickly that her shame was deeply rooted, in both the community and her own soul. An instantaneous healing could not erase more than a decade of trauma.

One day in her wanderings, she saw a sign that said "Sowing Peace." She heard in her mind the echo of Jesus' words, "Go in peace," and she thought that maybe this place could give her some clues. She walked under the sign and into the center inside, where a social worker greeted her warmly.

Hope asked about the name, and the social worker—let's call her Susana—explained that the workers at the center were all followers of Jesus, whom they saw as someone who wandered from place to place sowing seeds of peace. Susana had spent several years working with people dying from leprosy, cast out of society for their stigmatized illness. Then she worked for a while with children in need.

She was there when Jesus cured a poor boy with epilepsy, who had suffered terribly, often falling into the fire or water. The boy's healing had so impacted the gospel writers that they each later recorded it. And it so affected Susana that she felt called to leave her home with her family and cross over to the other side and work at Sowing Peace.

Susana possessed a large heart and a gift for listening, and she was a marvelous companion for Hope in her healing, Hope's midwife into a new life. But Susana also recognized that Hope needed to figure out a way to support herself. Hope had an idea that she shared one day with Susana, and Susana said, "You need to go talk with my husband." Let's call him Gregorio.

Now on the home side of the sea, Susana and Gregorio had lived near the pool called Bethzatha. It was close to Jerusalem's Sheep Gate, and, as the gospel writer John described it, it had five porticoes where people who were disabled or paralyzed lay all day long, waiting for the waters to get stirred and bubble up and cure them. Many were healed, but Gregorio was a very wise and compassionate man, and he realized that they needed more than healing. So he set up a business by the pool that he called Fountain Fizzworks.

Hope was exactly the kind of woman he loved to work with. She came to him with her idea. She had suffered so much under bad doctors, and had poured all of her money into quack cures. She wanted to study the healing properties of the herbs and spices that were native to her part of the world—the nard and myrrh and other plants that had true healing powers. Gregorio gave her a loan of one hundred denarii to begin her alternative healing shop, The Balm of Gilead.

Now Susana and Gregorio had two sons. The older one was named for a great Hebrew leader with a peaceful and reconciling spirit, and the younger for one of the twelve great tribes of Israel. Ascher was a snake charmer. One day the basket in which he kept his snake got a hole in the bottom of it. So he climbed up on his brother Caleb's shoulders and attached it to the trunk of a palm tree. They spent many fun hours throwing a ball they had made out of goat's hide into the basket, assigning one, two, and then eventually three points to their shots, depending on where they made them from.

The brothers became best friends with a boy named Bryant, who had also moved to the other side with his family, on a camel from their home in the Gobi Desert. Bryant missed his home sometimes, and he liked to call himself Gobi Bryant. So Ascher started calling himself Asheville Ascher.

Since they lived on the edge of the large lake known as the Sea of Galilee, Caleb, Ascher, and Gobi Bryant called themselves The Lakers. One day some of Gobi Bryants' friends visited from his hometown in Outer Mongolia. They called themselves The Desert Heat. A great championship tournament ensued, with The Lakers beating The Heat in four hotly contested games.

Now Hope often stopped at the end of her day and watched the boys playing. One afternoon, Caleb shouted out to her, "Wanna play?" You see, these boys had not been taught prejudice. They hadn't been coached in sexism or social stigmatization. So Hope joined them.

She played tentatively at first. But then a moment came when she leapt off her sandals, soared through the air, and slam-dunked the ball into the basket. For years she had believed that she could

never have so much energy, and this was her moment of liberation. And everyone on the court that day learned that laughter is the universal language.

The boys' acceptance of Hope paved the way for others. By their loving welcome, Caleb and Ascher and Gobi Bryant had showed the adults how to truly receive Hope back into the community. And they taught Hope how to recover joy after a lifetime of trauma.

Now, none of this would have happened if Jesus hadn't crossed over to the other side. And if Hope hadn't emotionally done the same thing. And if Susana, Gregorio, Caleb, and Ascher hadn't felt called to leave the comfort zone of the home side and boldly follow Jesus to the other shore.

There, they were stretched in ways that they had never imagined possible. Some days it felt like almost to the breaking point. Sometimes they collapsed in tears over the suffering they witnessed. But they also laughed harder than they ever had before. They learned and grew and gave and received more than they ever could have if they had stayed on the home side. And they—and the world—were better for it.

What kept them going was their faith in a God who promised always to be with them. And the example of sacrificial love given to them through Jesus, whose enormous healing power was as present and available to them as it was to Hope when she reached out and claimed it.

What kept them going was their faith in each other, and their many expressions to one another of love and support. And the courage of the people who they encountered every day on the other side. And their regular remembrance that, back on the home shore, there was a wide circle praying for them, taking care of each other, and watching out for the ones they love.

What kept them going was Hope.