

Sidetracked
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO
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Mark 5:21-43 *New Revised Standard Version*

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 hemorrhages 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 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 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.'

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. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. 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. 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. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Pastor Chuck has been preaching a sermon series on journeys in the Bible, so instead of plopping something else in the middle of that series, I decided to continue the theme with this text that's the assigned Lectionary Gospel reading for today. It is about a rather short journey of Jesus', when he is called for a mission, a purpose. Then, he gets sidetracked, but afterwards continues the mission and completes it, even when it looks impossible. And as it turns out, as it

usually does, the text that I chose a week and a half ago has something to teach us *this week*, this Sunday, after a very eventful week of news headlines.

In this sandwiched story in Mark, we see despair and we see hope, we see argument and perseverance, we see death and we see new life. Through all of it, there is grace – God’s promise that says that evil never has the last word, that transformation and new life are always, always possible.

Grace.

That word grace has been eloquently used this last week by the President of our country, in his eulogy for Clementa Pinckney, one of the pastors who was murdered in Charleston just 11 days ago. It is a moment in our history when someone came along and interrupted us, forced us to pay attention.

There have been a few things calling our attention as a nation and as a Christian people this last week:

--11 days ago 9 beautiful people were murdered during a Bible study.

--Their funerals began this week, and 2 days ago the President of the United States delivered the eulogy for one of them, and sang Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound.

--3 days ago, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that the federal government could provide nationwide tax subsidies for health insurance, cementing the Affordable Care Act.

--2 days ago, the Supreme Court of the United States decided that same-sex marriage would be a civil right nationwide.

--Today, the debate continues in South Carolina over whether (and how) to remove the Confederate Flag from the Capitol grounds.

--Today, many, many Americans and Christians are celebrating their new status as married wherever they go in the States, or the legal system’s support of their own convictions that same-sex marriage upholds love in a world where it is too often hard to find.

--Today, many other Americans and Christians are lamenting a legal decision that they do *not* agree with, that they believe diverges from the teachings of God and Christianity.

Today, *you* are being called to respond. Today, you have an opportunity to find out how God is calling you to follow God's path of unity and love, in the midst of all of these happenings, in the midst of disagreement, in the midst of confusion and differing viewpoints. And so the question is before you, as it was before Jesus when he was interrupted in his mission - how will you respond to this need and desire of our nation for healing?

These detours might be what you need in your life right now – if you have been looking for purpose, looking for a mission, maybe being sidetracked from daily life is God calling you to a stronger purpose, a purpose that responds with love and grace to pain.

Or maybe, you already have a strong mission already identified in your life, and these detours seem like just that – detours distracting you from the journey to which you have been called.

Maybe your daily life was keeping you plenty occupied, without a search for something else, but maybe that daily life was not particularly God-focused, or mission-focused.

Whoever you are this morning, like Jesus, you are being called to respond. What will your response be?

In *any* situation, we are called on, as followers of Christ and a God who *is* love, to respond with love, and grace. We are called on to tell people that grace means that evil never has the last word, that they are loved no matter what; we are called to tell them that the response that we make can have amazing, transformative, grace-filled power.

As Christians, in our daily lives, we are training always to respond to the great need of our neighbors, to respond to those folks who pop up in front of us and say "I need you." 11 days

ago, that need became an urgent thing, and today our response is still being called for in how we continue the story; how we continue to live the rest of our daily lives.

Each of us is facing these issues at very different level. Each of us comes to them with a different background, a different belief system. Maybe there are only two camps, but I'd be willing to bet that we fall on a spectrum of belief and response to these things in front of us as a nation. And yet, we are united in Christ, united in love. We might be at all different political opinions, and yet, we *all* are seeking a guide in Christ.

We've been sidetracked as a nation. How will you respond?

The scripture story this morning gives us an example of how Jesus responded. There were miracles of healing in response to someone coming to Jesus in need. Those miracles and the content of the story are really important – Jesus responded with love and healing; but, I think the end of these two stories have the biggest lesson for us today. That first one, sandwiched in the middle – Jesus didn't say, "Go away," he didn't say, "Oh all right, I couldn't help it, so I guess you're healed." No. He said "Your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed." The healing had already happened, but he was telling her to go and *be healed*, to go and *live* as a healed person, as a person of faith, as a person following the peace and love that Jesus had to offer. Go in peace. Just as Jesus told his disciples "peace." It didn't mean sit back and relax. It meant start with peace and go from there; go to *live* your life in the world.

And then he goes to heal a little girl, and at the end of that story he tells her family, "Give her something to eat," as she is walking, as she is moving about the room, as she is *living*. Give her something to eat; sustain this healing that I have performed; make it go forward and make her life as a healed girl, active in the world. Give her sustenance, give her nourishment, keep her going on the healing that I have begun.

It is just the beginning. Neither of those stories has an end, though they have beginnings and ends in this narrative. They don't end; they continue on to fulfill Jesus' mission, living in peace and giving sustenance to the world through healing.

When President Obama spoke the eulogy for Clementa Pinckney on Friday, he spoke about grace; he talked about that ending that isn't really an ending but is only the beginning of transformation. He said, *grace is not earned, is not merited, but it is the free and benevolent favor of God. ...God has visited grace upon us, for he has allowed us to see where we've been blind, and He has given us the chance where we've been lost to find our best selves.* President Obama knew that grace means that there is not an end when healing happens, it is only the beginning. President Obama talked about the confederate flag and knew that even if and when the flag is taken down from the capital grounds it would not be the end of that story. He says, *I don't think God wants us to stop there. For too long, we've been blind to the way past injustices continue to shape the present. Perhaps we see that now. Perhaps this tragedy causes us to ask some tough questions about how we can permit so many of our children to languish in poverty, or attend dilapidated schools, or grow up without prospects for a job or a career.*

He talked about the *criminal justice system*, only the beginning. It is not a system that should be used just to remove "unwanted" from our society, but to build them into our community. The woman bleeding wasn't part of the community, she wasn't part of the society, but Jesus healed her, and enabled her to go back to a community that could sustain her life and her healing. Can we do that, too?

President Obama talked about *racial bias that exists even if we do not use racial slurs.*

He talked about the *ability to debate and disagree.* Maybe we all have the same goals for peace and well-being in our country, and maybe we disagree on how to get there. Maybe *the solutions that we find together will be incomplete*, and maybe that story will have to keep living on step by step.

Not maybe, definitely. The story continues. Healing doesn't end with one act; we go forward, and live our lives going in peace, giving sustenance, and we try our best to hear each other's stories. Reverend Pinckney said at one point during his life that "Across the South, we

have a deep appreciation for history. We haven't always had a deep appreciation of each other's history."

President Obama said that *Clem understood that justice grows out of recognition of ourselves in each other; that my liberty depends on you being free, too.*

We have to listen to each other's stories.

Another author, in the same vein, wrote about Charleston, saying:

*"It would be a surprising and refreshing consequence to see Charleston's moral leaders gather citizens from suburban and inner city communities—white and black, Latino and Asian, business, government, civic and interfaith sectors—to commit to long term inclusive community building while mobilizing the resources to make it happen."*¹

Charleston, yes. Colorado Springs, too. Wouldn't that be a wonderful vision, of all of those relationships coming together, from suburban and inner-city, from the streets to the Broadmoor, white, black, Latino, Asian, business, government, civic and interfaith, all coming together to talk about these long-term stories, journeys, that we have to shape *together*.

We have things in front of us, that sidetrack us, maybe for the good.

How do we respond to the pernicious, sneaky racism that finds a way to shape us, despite what we want? How do we find a way to make sure that we are always following the love of Christ, rather than letting political opinions and biblical interpretations divide us?

How do we become Disciples of Christ, where Christian Unity is our polar star and Christ guides us?

How do we respond? We talk about them together, to talk about our views and not hide them away because of judgment. We let the experiences of the past week shape our coming days, and the healing that has happened in too many tragic situations not be the end of the story, but the beginning of a life lived for and in the love of Christ. We are all here for that love, and the

¹ Franklin, Robert M. "What Can We Learn From the Charleston Shootings? Hard Choices Yield Great Rewards" *Sightings* 6.25.15

first step is to answer that question, How will you respond? How will we continue to follow the love that Christ has planted in each and every one of us, living our days going in peace, and giving sustenance to the healing that Christ has put inside each of us? How will you respond?

Communion Meditation

There was plenty of inspiration on the internet this week for words of response to the news this last week. Many pastors took to the web, many of them celebrating the news of the Supreme Court's decision on same-sex marriage. In their celebration, one of the phrases so many used was "LoveWins." You would think that love winning is a good thing...but one of my friends had another inspiring piece and a reminder for me that I pass now on to you² – Travis said that his response when seeing "LoveWins" was, "Wait, love wins?" Don't hear me discrediting the struggle for equality, the long standing hope of many, but doesn't "love wins" mean that someone loses? He pointed out that that's not who we are as Disciples of Christ. We don't say that I win and you lose because I achieved a goal. Instead we invite everyone to the table to discuss together, to say "Tell me about your views. Tell me what has brought you to them, tell me what you believe and how you are finding God's love in that." He talked about the language that we use that breeds subconscious violence within us – "fight," "struggle", major blow to a cause. What's the opposite of "love wins"? It's not that Hate Loses – that's not what's on the other side of this particular debate. Instead it seems to be that "disagreement loses," and that's *not* something that we want in our church context. Instead we celebrate the love that is patient and kind. Love "is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail." – 1st Corinthians 13:4-7 (GNT) Is that love represented in "love wins"? Love doesn't keep a record of wrongs. Love isn't proud, love never fails...Love doesn't *win*, love simply *IS*. Everywhere that we go, love is always winning, it is always there, inside of us, and we find ways to grow it ever stronger

² Travis McKee, <https://thechurchisproject.wordpress.com/2015/06/26/the-church-is-love/>

within ourselves. Instead of “LoveWins,” “Loves.” That’s what we celebrate when we come to this table, to be united together in disagreement, to know that disagreement is ok, know that we are all seeking the love of Christ that just is. We may celebrate or we may lament, but we are all here together seeking God’s guidance, seeking to be at a table where there is room for *all*, because *all* will always be welcome at this table, no matter your views on the Supreme Court decisions, no matter your sexual orientation or practices, no matter who you have been or who you will be – all are welcome. Christ invited us to this table and it is not for us to say love wins or loses, or disagreement is not ok. We are here because Christ has invited us. Let us come to this table in a spirit of unity, a spirit of welcome, a spirit of God’s love, nourished in us by bread and cup.