

A SERMON PREACHED ON

SUNDAY, JULY 1, 2018,

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

A minister, a priest, and a rabbi were playing poker when the police raided the game. Turning to the minister, the lead police officer said, “Reverend Allsworth, were you gambling?” Turning his eyes to heaven, the priest whispered, “Lord, forgive me for what I am about to do.” To the police officer, he then said, “No, officer, I was not gambling.” The officer then asked the priest, “Father Murphy, were you gambling?” Again, after an appeal to heaven, the priest replied, “No, officer, I was not gambling.” Turning to the rabbi, the officer again asked, “Rabbi Goldstein, were you gambling?” Shrugging his shoulders, the rabbi replied, “With whom?”ⁱ After several weeks gone on vacation, it’s difficult to get back into the swing of things. People asked me whether I went to church on the Sundays I had off, and I felt like the rabbi in the joke: with whom? I have colleagues that like to visit the churches of their minister friends when they are away for a bit of respite. Me: I feel that it would not be vacation if I were to show up in the pew chairs on Sunday, though the temptation was great. I figured that folks needed a break from my thoughts and presence, just as I need time for renewal away from the weekly routine. So here I am, back in the saddle again (as they say), and a lot has happened in the lectionary we were sharing together from the *Gospel of John* when I left. We are now back in *Mark* where we will be learning about Jesus’ healing ministry among his country folk, this time focusing on a woman who could not stop hemorrhaging blood, and the death of the daughter of a local religious authority, both considered ritually unclean because of the contaminants linked to death and disease. In these two instances, a boundary is crossed as Jesus breaks down long established barriers and heals those afflicted. The two stories also pay tribute to the faith of the woman and of the leader, whose belief in Jesus and the healing power he brings from God allow them and those whom they love to be healed. This is a sign to us who hear this reading today, that faith plus love are keys to overcoming what ails us. I’m not sure that we ever think of it that way or in this manner; but should we put our faith in the healer, working through the love of God, the response will be what we have been ultimately searching for.

The thing that we are most often afraid of is death, though there are more painful alternatives. That is why we pray and hope for peace at the time that those whom we love take their leave from us. Death for us is not cessation of life, but merely a transference from this form of existence into the next – a higher, liberated form of life. Often death is a desired outcome. I personally would rather come to the end of life in peace than struggle through countless days of living in pain.

This was not the case with Jairus' daughter, however. She was young, and he was not willing to let her go so early in what was to be a promising long life. Jairus was a synagogue official, and was undoubtedly aware that Jesus was not welcome in this place of worship. In fact the last time he was there, the authorities had begun to put their plans in place to have him assassinated. To seek Jesus' help, Jairus must have been willing to set aside all his pride to come and ask for Jesus' intervention. In another sense, though, there is nothing at all remarkable about Jairus' appeal. A parent of a dying child will do nearly anything to save the child. Jairus is driven by desperation to seek Jesus' help.ⁱⁱ While a great crowd has gathered around Jesus, Jesus takes time to go with this anguished father. The crowd is never more important than the individual in need.

This is an important model for ministry for today's church. We will seldom save people by the boatload. But we do need to be ever-vigilant to address the needs of the individual person. So Jesus goes with a few disciples to the house where the little girl was lying. The people chastised her father, saying that they should leave the healer alone; after all, there was nothing more that could be done for her, since she was dead. Jesus tells Jairus, "do not be afraid, only believe," and he tells all the mourners at the house that the child is not dead, only asleep." And of course the crowd mocked him. But ignoring their ridicule, he takes the family in the room where the little girl was lain, and speaking to her in his native Aramaic, takes her hand and says to her "talitha cumi," which means, "little girl, get up and come (walk) to me." But touching this girl violated Torah law, which renders a person who has contact with a dead body unclean until evening or in some cases for seven days. Violators were required to remain outside the house, away from all others until the time of contamination passed.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet the religious lawyers could no longer make claim against Jesus or the little girl's family, as there was no contagion - only life - since the little girl was now awake, up and walking!

I think it is important to note here that the text says nothing about the faith of the little girl in her own healing. It is her family, most particularly her father, who has faith, and his belief brought about the restoration of the one whom he loved. Again, there is a message for us as a church here. Our prayers for others matter, especially when folks we know or loved ones we cherish are not able, due to the severity of their illness, let's say, to speak with us and elucidate what their belief system is. I've had people say to me that while unconscious during surgery they have felt their bodies literally lifted up off their bed, and they attributed it to being lifted up in prayer by groups or individuals engaged in the practice. That is why I believe it is important also to solicit the prayers of others. Just as many of my Jewish friends believe and teach their family members to never turn down a blessing, so it should be with prayer. If nothing else, for those who have faith in bodily energies, the sending forth of love and light is truly helpful, especially when one is surrounded by it. Being surrounded by nature makes a big difference also. A case in point: prior to building the recently opened Cleveland Clinic Avon Hospital, architect Randy Geise approached caregivers at the healthcare system wondering if there was a difference in patient outcomes based on hospital window views. "He speculated whether a view of the sky, buildings, or nature (grass, trees, etc.) made a difference," says nursing consultant Nancy Albert. "We had no idea." It was discovered, after a long and

intensive study, just what one might imagine: Patients in nature or sky room views had higher perceptions of general health.^{iv}

The bottom line, as we learn in today's gospel text, is that who we are and how we label ourselves or allow others to label us is important. The people said the young girl was dying; Jesus said she was merely asleep. The difference in perception made way for a different outcome. Now, this is not to say that we can wish illness away; but how it affects us is greatly dependent on how we self-identify when we are sick. This is all about quality of life. Jairus believed that Jesus could recast his daughter in the veil of wellness, and it was so. Not everyone who calls upon the name of Jesus will have this experience, we know. But we do know that if comfort and peace are part of the ultimate eternal equation, then we can be assured that God hears our prayers and sends the omnipresent spirit of the living Christ to be with us, to bring us to wholeness, in whatever form it may present itself. In Christ's death and resurrection we have the living hope that all things are possible, including our own healing. It takes practice to have a healing prayer life; that is why desperate folks can be so good at it, as it takes a lot of time and energy, something desperation produces in great measure....

Going back into the storyline for today, let's look at the second half that deals with the woman who had a recurring issue of blood, for which she was also rendered ritually unclean. She had spent countless monies on doctors and healers for twelve years, literally since the birth of Jairus' daughter, who is coincidentally twelve years old, all to no avail. She arrives with the crowd who wishes to see Jesus, and although one assumes that there was a lot of pushing and shoving going on, Jesus feels this particular woman's touch, feels the healing power going from himself, and asks "who touched my clothes?" For she had said to herself beforehand, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be made well." Upon doing so, immediately the flow of her blood was dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction. Jesus felt it and knew it also. He knew of the isolation that she had borne for all these many years, as due to her illness she would not have been welcome anywhere, not even in Jairus' synagogue. This woman is clearly an "outsider"—a person who does not count—does not belong. I can't help but think of the thousands of refugees, particularly children, who are being given this message today at the border we share with Mexico. Imagine being unwelcome anywhere, and there is nothing that you have done nor can undo that will change that. There are times I really do wish we *were* a Christian nation; then at least we would know how to respond to the current crisis, one that envisions no facile resolution. Where is faith found when it separates families, particularly children from their primary caregivers? And it is not as if we, as a nation, plan to stand up and say, as Christ does in this lesson, go - - your faith has served you well. I am reminded too easily of the separating of families during the 250 years of the slave trade, and I worry if that is not where we are headed again, to a time when we see people as animals rather than human beings. To be sure, in most places we treat our pets and farm animals better than the welcome mat we have slammed up against the door at the border entry. I pray as part of my prayers that when those who are responsible for the current immigration crisis meet their maker they will be reminded that every form of degradation they placed upon so many innocents are sins of the greatest magnitude against God and the love we have been told we can count on as faithful believers. I ask you, what does the Lamb of God think about the fact we have allowed

the caged incarceration of mostly helpless children, a cruel mess that our government now has to sort out? But I already know the answer to that, and so should you. A citizenry that is unmoved by the perpetual killing of elementary and high school students in senseless gun violence will not be moved by several thousand more rounded up and locked away until when? Who will save them? So I ask your prayers for them, for our leaders, for those who have not yet stepped up to the plate to lead, for families, for the disenfranchised, for those who are alone. Comfort them, O Lord. Keep them strong in faith and hope. Assure them by your presence of Spirit that we have not forgotten them. Walk among them so that they can touch the hem of your garment and remember your promise to be with us always. May they feel our light and our love. For we matter, Lord. And all that we do matters. May we find a way, O God, to let your kingdom break through, and may we take on your banner of righteousness, chanting in our silent hearts, We shall overcome! We shall overcome!

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ⁱ <http://omswami.com/2016/08/of-what-good-is-goodness.html>+

ⁱⁱ <https://www.sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/mark-521-43/>

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} <https://consultqd.clevelandclinic.org/room-view-hospital-window-views-affect-clinical-outcomes/>