Pentecost 6B (7/1/2018)

Lamentations 3:22-33

Psalm 30

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

**Mark 5:21-43**

*Desperation compels us to disregard all kinds of protocol in order to meet our needs. In response to desperation, Jesus also disregards codes of proper behavior, prioritizing the interests of people in need over laws and customs. And Jesus’ example is more than a heartwarming if impractical ideal. Compassion acknowledges all that we have in common with the whole human family, and so it makes us more fully human.*

The Gospel of Mark is known for a narrative technique called intercalation. Beginning one story, the author inserts a second story prior to finishing the first, thereby interpreting one according to the other. The surrounding story is not complete without the embedded one and vice versa; the stories belong together. This method of storytelling is also called sandwiching, but I think intercalation sounds smarter.

Our Gospel for today is a prime example. In the surrounding story, Jairus, a local religious leader, pleads with Jesus to heal his sick child. The journey to Jairus’ house, however, is interrupted by another story: a woman suffering from persistent bleeding braves the crowd in order to touch Jesus’ clothes in hopes of finding relief from her affliction. Subsequent to Jesus’ interaction with the hemorrhaging woman, the first story concludes with Jesus raising Jairus’ daughter from death.

**It’s intercalation – together, these stories of healing and new life tell us more than each could on its own**. So, what do they tell us? On the one hand, the characters involved could not be more different. Jairus is an established member of the community, a man who holds a position of relative power, and so he commands our attention. By contrast, the hemorrhaging woman is nameless, beleaguered by a long-term illness, and destitute on account of her medical costs. To add insult to injury, her condition renders her ritually unclean, likely relegating her to the margins of her community.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In spite of these differences, however, Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman have something in common. **Both have reached the point of desperation, and both are hoping against hope that Jesus can help**. It would be highly unusual to witness a member of the religious establishment fall to his knees and plead with an itinerant healer for a medical miracle. Jairus’ very public expression of vulnerability is unconventional, but every parent can understand – is there anything you wouldn’t do to save your dying child? Likewise, the hemorrhaging woman is at her wit’s end. There’s nothing she hasn’t already tried to stop the bleeding, so there’s no crowd, no religious law, no social barrier that can prevent her from getting to Jesus. “If I but touch his clothes,” she convinces herself, “I will be made well.”

It’s the logic of desperation. **Desperation compels people to disregard all kinds of protocol in order to meet their needs**. **Potential consequences barely register against the direness of their circumstances, so desperate people are willing to take enormous risks and go to great lengths to achieve an outcome**.

“If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.”

“If I but starve myself, I will be beautiful.”

“If I but undergo one more treatment, I will be a parent.”

“If I but endure the abuse, I will keep the roof over my head.”

“If I but exchange my pills for needles, I will satisfy my craving.”

“If I but end my life, I will be at peace.”

“If I but cross through the border checkpoint, I and my children will be safe.”

It’s the logic of desperation.

**If Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman have desperation in common, however, they also have Jesus**. Jesus doesn’t disqualify the hemorrhaging woman on account of her preexisting condition, he doesn’t question her ritual purity, he doesn’t scold her for touching him without permission. No, Jesus halts the entire procession to acknowledge her. In the words of one interpreter, “It is as though the whole of heaven and earth stops in its tracks until she becomes known to him.”[[2]](#footnote-2) “Daughter,” Jesus calls her, conferring dignity on her despite her second-class status, “your faith has saved you; go in peace….” And he responds similarly to Jairus’ plea, taking the man’s child by the hand in spite of the religious prohibition against touching a corpse.[[3]](#footnote-3) “Little girl, get up.” And she does.

In both cases, **Jesus’ response to desperation is compassionate. And, even as desperate people violate codes of proper behavior in order to reach him, so does Jesus, prioritizing the interests of people in need over laws and customs**.

The regularity with which Jesus practices compassion may cause us to take it for granted. But, as one interpreter points out, it is precisely Jesus’ consistency that warrants our attention:

Jesus responds to the vulnerability of these… different characters, restoring them to health, life, and wholeness… because he always responds to vulnerability, offering health, life, and wholeness to those in greatest need of them. …that has been the consistent, if not relentless, pattern of Mark’s story about Jesus: he everywhere and always notices, cares for, and responds to those who are most vulnerable.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**In short, the divine response to desperation is empathy and action**.

This raises the question of our own responses. **Isn’t it astounding the lengths to which we go to distance ourselves from desperate people?** We preoccupy ourselves with their perceived moral failures, or cite the rule of law, or simply turn our attention away – anything to avoid coming alongside them. We know deep down that if we stand too close to their fire, we’re likely to get burned. And as soon as we feel their pain, we can no longer excuse ourselves of responsibility toward them. One commentator calls it the “art of disassociation”: “my heart is a gated community,” she writes, “my ideology is a border patrol.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

But, **the cost of this detachment is the loss of our humanity**. To quote the same writer again: “Empathy is a narrative we tell ourselves to make other people real to us, to feel for and with them, and thereby to extend and enlarge and open ourselves.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Dear church, **Jesus’ example is more than a heartwarming if impractical ideal. We are made for each other, thus Jesus sets the standard for our common life; indeed, he embodies divine compassion that he might inspire our own. Compassion acknowledges all that we have in common with the whole human family, and so it makes us more fully human. In response to the logic of desperation, it’s the logic of connection, the logic of love. And although it may cost us something, it’s what will save us in the end**.

1. See Numbers 5:2-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mark D. W. Edington, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/06/pentecost-6-b-on-vulnerability-need-and-hope/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rebecca Solnit, “Rebecca Solnit: Not Caring is a Political Art Form,” <https://lithub.com/rebecca-solnit-not-caring-is-a-political-art-form/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)