

The 6th Sunday after Pentecost
July 1, 2018
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27
Psalm 130
2 Corinthians 8:7-15
Mark 5:21-43

For the past several weeks, our Sunday readings have been telling a story. Or, more precisely, each week has told part of a larger story which then gets picked up and carried forward the next week. Since the first Sunday in June, we've been reading from 1 Samuel for our first reading and from 2 Corinthians for our second reading and from Mark for our gospel reading.

In theory, we get the whole of the story this way. But in practice, we skip so much. A few weeks ago in 1 Samuel, we heard of how the people wanted a king (even though Samuel told them it was a bad idea), so they got King Saul. But we skipped the part that told how Saul proved to be a disappointment. The next week, we heard of how David was anointed to be the new king, even as the old king continued to reign. But then we skipped the part where David goes back to being the youngest of eight sons and bides his time while Saul continues to rule. Last week, we heard about how Saul allowed the shepherd-boy David to go up in battle against Goliath. But we skipped over the awkwardness of Saul's relationship to David the hero and the paranoia and the madness of King Saul – and his death in battle. And then, today, we start 2 Samuel with David's "Song of the Bow" in honor of Saul and his son Jonathan.

Skipping big chunks is a practical necessity if we're going to read manageable sections on a Sunday morning. You're not likely to sit through our reading five chapters of 1 Samuel at a single sitting each Sunday in June. And the parts we skip are not always critically significant. But it can feel disjointed. And sometimes, the parts we skip are actually profoundly significant.

In the case of this morning's gospel, I worry about the parts we skip. The opening words point us back to what we skipped over:

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side ...

Last week, we heard how Jesus and his disciples first crossed the Sea of Galilee, and we heard about the storm that nearly swamped the boat they were in for that crossing.

And that's fine, as far as it goes, but we skipped what happened after the storm and after they all landed on that other side. I won't go into the details, but here are a few key points: they landed in a Gentile region; and Jesus met a man there, living among the tombs; and when all was said and done, about 2,000 pigs were drowned in the sea. That's a lot. Jesus, a Jew, crosses over to encounter Gentiles and demons and pigs.

And this morning Jesus has "crossed again ... to the other side." The part we skipped hints, I think, that even at home Jesus is still likely to cross some boundaries, still likely to go to places he ought not to go.

Now at first blush, the story of Jairus might feel like Jesus is back on familiar ground. A person approaches Jesus. A fellow Jew. A leader in the local synagogue. A respected, respectable figure – presumably with wealth to go with power and prestige. He has a name. And, yes, he’s a man ... in a culture where men can talk together with other men without raising any eyebrows.

He falls on his knees and begs Jesus to come with him to make his daughter well. Unusual. The religious leaders are typically antagonists. But given the circumstances, it’s understandable. He pours out his heart to Jesus. And the request is made directly and with appropriate deference.

So Jesus goes with him for reasons that likely make perfect sense to everyone. But then a woman with a chronic illness reaches out to touch Jesus. And we could skip over what happens next, thinking it’s nothing more than an interruption in the first story begun. But I think we’ll miss a lot if we skip over it. This second story is woven in with the first. One healing overlaps with the other. They’re interconnected. They interpret one another.

And what makes that clear to me is the fact that the woman disrupts the balance, the equilibrium. She’s nothing at all like Jairus. She’s never named. A nobody, with nothing left to give to anyone; whatever she might have had once is long gone. And, yes, she’s a woman ... in a culture where women needed a man – a man like Jairus – to address another man.

So she doesn’t approach Jesus directly, with appropriate deference. She comes up from behind, to steal a healing. She had to. According to the purity codes of the day, everyone she touches in the crowd would be rendered “unclean” simply by brushing up against her. By rights, she shouldn’t even be out in public.

And she knows it, of course. That’s why when she finally comes forward to tell Jesus what she had done, she comes in fear and trembling. Of course she’s terrified. For so many years, everyone told her she was unworthy, cursed by God. And when she steps forward now, she had to expect that this would become one more humiliation, one more time for someone to tell her should know better. But she throws herself at Jesus’ feet and recounts her whole story, tells her whole truth.

But Jesus looks at her ... and sees her as nobody else has – at least for a long, long time. And he calls her “Daughter.” No longer downcast or outcast. Now she belongs. Others may have looked down on her, but Jesus looks at her only with love ... to welcome her home again.

The moment she touched Jesus’ cloak, the flow of blood stopped, we were told. She felt the healing in her body. Now she feels the healing of life and love in her heart and in her soul.

That’s the story that seemingly interrupts the first story. And while it’s not as obvious, it’s at this point that the first story, once interrupted, returns now to interrupt the second. For while Jesus is still speaking to the woman, some people come to tell Jairus that his daughter is dead.

Except it's not really an interruption. These stories are interconnected and interwoven. The first healing, though it came as an interruption, makes sense of the other. And so it's not an interruption so much as it's simply another opportunity for Jesus to love, to care.

Now if we had skipped it, we would miss noticing that Jesus should not touch or be touched by either the woman or the young girl. By rights, he should not reach out to touch a dead body. But for Jesus, human need always overrules technical rules.

And if we had skipped over that intervening story, we might misinterpret Jesus' reason for caring for Jairus' daughter. We might think he cared for her because her father was a leader in the synagogue, a man who knew how to pray, to frame the right words for an urgent need. Or that the father, in opening his heart to Jesus was able to open Jesus' well of compassion. Or we might think Jesus took pity on her because she's just 12 years old, maybe sweet and innocent and yet on the verge of an adult life. We might think that Jesus thought she deserved a chance to get married and have a family of her own.

But in the light of the other story, we're left to wonder if maybe the reason Jesus cares has nothing to do with her father and his status or his proper piety and prayer or his heart-breaking story or who this girl is or what she might grow up to do and become. Maybe Jesus heals her – just as he heals the other woman – because of who he is. It's a point simultaneously obvious and hard to overemphasize.

The Lutheran pastor and writer David Lose says this:

Perhaps we've become so accustomed to Jesus' compassionate response that it doesn't make much of an impression on us, but just now, at this place in Mark's Gospel and at this point in our national history, I think it's worth noting that the very consistency, even predictability of this scene is what makes it so extraordinary.

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. He has just crossed once again the border between two opposing lands and contrasting, even hostile, cultures. His mission in both territories is the same – to seek out, heal, and restore those who are most vulnerable ... And 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.ⁱ

And so I remind you to take a care not to skip parts of this story, lest we miss the point that these are stories of how God is at work in Jesus, in Jesus who crosses boundaries – always in order to destroy that walls that would divide us, to heal what ails us all.

In Rachel Naomi Remen's book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, she tells a story about a woman who had a severe reaction to a treatment for her cancer. She packed herself a bag and drove 25 miles to the hospital, having to pull over several times to vomit, then spending a full day in the ER. When Dr. Remen asked her why she didn't call a friend to help, she said they were all working and they didn't know anything about her medical condition.

"Then why didn't you call me?" [she asked.]

"Well, it's not really your field either," she replied.

"Jessie," I said, "even children instinctively run to others when they fall down." With a great deal of heat she said, "Yes, I've never understood that. It's so silly. Kissing the boo-boo doesn't help the pain at all." I was stunned. "Jessie," I said, "it doesn't help the pain, it helps the loneliness."ⁱⁱ

And if we are truly to follow where Jesus leads, we will be called to do the same, crossing boundaries whenever needed. Because in the kingdom of God, the person next to you – whoever that person is – is not just an interruption; she – he – is always a child of God. And a neighbor is an opportunity to care, to feed, to love, to reach out and offer a healing touch. And we will never run out of such opportunities, for children of God are everywhere.

ⁱ David Lose @ <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/06/pentecost-6-b-on-vulnerability-need-and-hope/>.

ⁱⁱ Story retold by John Shea, *Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Preachers and Teachers: Eating With the Bridegroom* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2005), p. 167.