

Sermon: The Little Girl in Us All
Text: Mark 5:21-43
Date: July 1, 2018
Context: WWPC
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum,"
which means, "Little girl, arise!"*

Mark 5:41

We will get to the Good News quickly, I promise. I also promise not to linger on the bad news, except to say this: it feels like there is a lot of it at the moment.

Underneath everything that is currently going on in the life of our country, immigrant children still being kept in cages and sent to tent camps, troubling Supreme Court decisions around who can come to America and who cannot, another mass shooting, this time not in a school, or a church, or a movie theater, but in a newsroom, targeting journalists, a lethal gesture you just knew was coming -- amidst all of that, there is one image I just can't get out of my mind.

You know the one. It's already an iconic image, of that little girl, standing crying, terrified and helpless, while ICE agents handcuff her mother, presumably just prior to taking the mom to detention and shipping the little girl to God literally knows where. I keep thinking not only of the trauma the girl herself is feeling, which is plain enough on her face, but of the trauma her mother must be feeling.

Personally, I'm hoping that her father is not also being held in detention somewhere.

Because I'm wondering about the lengths to which he would go in order to save his baby girl. But here's perhaps an even better question, one that's decidedly more relevant to us here today: what lengths would Jesus go to in order to save this child?

Turns out we might actually be able to answer that latter question.

Our text for today picks up mid-way through the fifth chapter of Mark and drops us down right smack in the middle of an astonishing sequence of events in the life of Jesus.

It opens with the phrase, “When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side...” In ordinary stories this phrase might serve as just a nice, benign segue, a way to get the main character from one place to the next.

But this is no ordinary story. And the place Jesus is returning from is no ordinary place.

At the start of this chapter, and with no explanation as to his motives, Jesus gets into a boat and crosses the Sea of Galilee.

The significance of this crossing is lost on modern readers, but it’s enormous. The Sea of Galilee is the first century equivalent of the wall our president is so determined to build. It’s a barrier that separates the good people from the bad, the clean people from the unclean.

So just sailing across those waters is a kind of subversive act, a breaching of that barrier. It’s a way of saying, I don’t recognize this wall as valid. It is a powerful declaration that the people who live on the other side of this lake are every bit as worthy and deserving of God’s love as the people who live on this side.

Once ashore, Jesus and his companions are immediately met by a kind of monster—a man who is possessed by evil spirits, who lives among the dead in a land inhabited by swine. He’s such a threatening and untamed force that the locals have tried to bind him up in chains. But he’s so strong he’s broken free of them. He is an unholy terror who stalks the landscape by day like a beast, wandering among a herd of local swine, and he disappears at night to sleep among the tombs.

All three of these things -- the unclean spirits, contact with pigs and proximity to the dead -- would have profoundly offended an observant Jew of that era. All of those things are specifically named in the holiness codes of the Old Testament as unclean and verboten, as it were.

Anyone who has contact with even one of these profanities would have been deemed to be ceremonially unclean and, thus, subject to stringent purification rituals.

But Jesus is not just anyone. Without a second's thought, he steps out of the boat, evidently heedless of arbitrary constructs --- even ones that are religiously sanctioned -- that isolate people from the community and leave them bound in chains, literal or figurative.

Now, this crazy, unclean man approaches the landing party and what is the first thing Jesus does?

This wild, dangerous, frightening monster draws near and what does Jesus do? He asks him a question, maybe the kindest and most important question anyone can ask of someone they've never met before:

What is your name? Tell me, sir. I want to get to know you better.

So here's my question for you:

Do you have any cousins like this guy? Any family members whom you don't want to be around these days because they frighten you a bit? An aunt or a brother-in-law whose happiness about for those children being carted off and kept in cages strike you as troubling if not a little monstrous?

You might try Jesus's approach. Cross the boundary that's now separating you from them, and make human-to-human, person-to-person contact.

Ask a question that's rooted in kindness and compassion. Don't start with their views about brown people, and don't grill them about why they only get their news from one source.

Instead, maybe start by asking how things are going at work, or in their marriage, or with their treatment for the sarcoma they were diagnosed with last year.

And then just see where the conversation goes from there. You might be surprised.

So, yeah, it's worth knowing where Jesus has been and what he's been up to. Because it was no ordinary place. And it's this is no ordinary story, and it's about to take another turn.

Jesus returns from the other side of this small sea and he is again immediately greeted by a man with an urgent need. His name is Jairus and his daughter is deathly ill.

As has been true for millions of people in desperate straits over the centuries, Jesus is his last best hope. So he comes, seeking help, pleading on behalf of his daughter.

“My baby girl is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live. Please, sir. I’ll beg if I have to. Please, come.”

What happens next?

“So he went with him,” Mark tells us.

I don’t know if Jesus had other plans or priorities for that day, but if he did, he changed them, because of course that’s what Jesus would do when he learns of this little girl’s plight.

On the journey to the father’s home, he is met yet again, this time by a woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years. She has been suffering not only from the physical effects of this chronic loss of blood but from the social, psychological, economic and religious effects of her condition, too.

Because at that time a woman who was bleeding in this way would have been considered, you guessed it, unclean. Not welcome in public, not welcome in the temple. Not really welcome anywhere. In effect a candidate for lifelong quarantine. Might as well send her off to a detention facility.

“Who touched my clothes?” Jesus says. He felt power go out of him, a disturbance in the Force as it were, and he wants to know who is behind it.

He has every right to be angry. An unclean woman, presumably also unmarried, has touched him and now, theoretically at least, Jesus is also unclean, not to mention that this kind of public contact between a man and an unmarried woman is scandalous.

But there’s a big crowd following Jesus. No way to get away with such a thing without being noticed. The woman is caught out and she has no choice but to cop to what she has done.

She approaches, fearful of the reprimand that is surely coming. Even if a stern rebuke is something this beleaguered woman is used to, the harsh words will still hurt.

And what happens next?

“Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

All of this -- the encounter with the monster, with the desperate man whose daughter is dying, with the bleeding woman, desperate for a cure -- in Mark's gospel, all of this happens in the space of less than one chapter.

But that's not even the end of it. There is still more to come. While Jesus is dealing with this bleeding woman, news arrives that Jairus's daughter is dead.

Turn around, the people say. No point going any further. Might as well get back to doing whatever it was you had planned for this day. The door of hope has closed.

Oh, and by the way, this girl is not only dead, she is also now -- again, you guessed it -- ceremonially unclean. The only people who can touch her are the priests, the ones who made these rules.

In an ordinary story it would make perfect sense to turn and go home at this point. But of course this is not how Jesus responds to the devastating news of the young girl's demise.

Because this is no ordinary story. And because for Jesus, even death itself is an arbitrary boundary.

They say your daughter is dead. And now you feel like your hope is dead along with her? I am here to tell you: fear not. Death never has the final say in the story I'm writing.

Talitha cum, he declares to the lifeless girl. Arise little one. Life awaits you.

And that's what I want to say to that little girl weeping for her mother, confused and terrified, and to the little girl inside each one of us here today who feels like our own hopes for a bright hopeful future for our country are fading.

Talitha cum! Arise! Because hope is still alive!

Now, admittedly, I might be in a minority on this point.

A pastor friend of mine recently put up a link on his FB page to an article that featured the headline: *If Your Church Doesn't Preach the Gospel . . .*

With that as a teaser, the article began this way:

This past week brought yet another wave of critique for tired preachers everywhere. Across my newsfeed was the imperative: If your pastor does not preach about these immigrant children, then you should leave your church.

Well, here's a suggestion:

If your pastor does not preach the Gospel this week, then you should leave your church.

Okay, fair enough. But here's the problem. What if showing compassion and concern for that little girl *is* the Gospel?

I mean, honestly, if Jesus of Nazareth were to suddenly materialize in our country, in the here and now, where do you think he would be?

Think he'd be teaching in some Sunday school classroom, explaining the finer points of the book of Philemon?

Do you think he'd be attending a church where you can safely go without having to worry if God is less concerned about whether the stained glass needs to be replaced, or if the praise band is all playing in tune, and more concerned about the plight of that traumatized little girl and her heartbroken mother?

I sincerely doubt it. Also, if you believe that, you have not read a single word of the Bible: not the beginning part where God liberates the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt, or the middle part where the prophets call God's people to repent for their neglect of the poor and their hostility to the stranger.

And you certain haven't read the Gospel part. Because, I'm actually wrong about whether Jesus might turn up in church. Turns out he did frequent a synagogue or two in his day. Except he didn't stay rooted in the pews. He took over the pulpit. And here are the very first lines of his very first sermon, and I'll bet it was the go to message every time he got to proclaim the Gospel:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring

good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

My friend who posted the link to the article allowed as to what he really appreciated was the author's recognition that, in times like these, waging and sustaining hope from the pulpit Sunday after Sunday can be exhausting.

I get that. It is tiring. I'm tired and I'll bet you're tired, too. You might be sunburned from gathering at the Families Belong Together Rally, or your fingers might be cramping up from all the letters you've been writing to your reps in Congress.

But here's the thing, the final thing that must be said on this Sunday before the Fourth of July. We remain in a fight for our country. As I noted two weeks ago, it's not an ideological campaign or a partisan battle.

It's a fight to save the soul of America, and to realize the dream of liberty and justice for all. For these are not just principles our Founders cared about. They are the foundational building blocks of the realm and reign of God.

And like it or not, the fight for justice never comes quick or easy.

The fight for emancipation, for liberty and justice for African American people, took a long time, and in fact we're still fighting it.

The fight for women's right to vote, and to be ordained, and to be treated like full human beings, took a long time, and in fact we're still fighting it.

The fight for the right of our LGBT sisters and brothers, and children and parents, to be ordained, and married, and treated like full human beings took a long time, and in fact we're still fighting it.

So if you're tired, take a breath, or take a break if you need one. And then heed the words of Jesus:

Talitha cum. Arise!