

Pentecost 4b, June 20, 2021

Mark 5:21-43 LFLC

Over my almost 50+ years of ordained ministry,  
 the biggest revolutions in the Church have been the changes around racial integration,  
 different worship styles, the role of women and women clergy,  
 and the struggle for acceptance by GLBTQ Christians.

And I hope and pray those and other revolutions will continue  
 and that Lutherans will always remember that we are a Reformation Church—  
 a church always in need of reform and always ready to be reformed—  
 no matter whether conventions, bishops, clergy, congregations  
 or individual members say otherwise.

But where did these revolutions start?

Well, certainly not with me and my ministry, but with Jesus and with his—  
 with this Jesus who was on his way from somewhere to somewhere  
 when he was stopped by a man named Jairus,  
 the president of the local synagogue--  
 who fell to his knees in front of Jesus and begged him  
 to come lay hands on his little daughter, who was at death's door.

Now, we have heard this story and ones like it so many times  
 that we have either forgotten or never recognized  
 just how revolutionary and radical this request was.  
 Because, you see, if you read the book of Leviticus,  
 you'll find out that the three nastiest things in the world  
 according to that ancient patriarchal and male-dominated religion--  
 you will discover that the three things that polluted and defiled men  
 were contact with blood, with women and with dead bodies.

Now, what had originally started out as signs of respect for life (namely, blood),  
 for the givers of life (namely, women), and for the profound nature  
 of the end of life (namely, death)—what had started out  
 as signs of respect had become burdensome and superstitious  
 rules and laws enforcing the fear of contamination. . .  
 as well as the imposition of disciplines and punishments  
 to deal with the resulting impurity.

So, as I said a moment ago, it was forbidden for any male to come in contact with blood,  
 to have unregulated public contact with women—which meant that if you were a Rabbi,  
 you were not even to speak with your wife in public--  
 and men were forbidden to have careless contact with the dead.  
 And if a man did break those three rules, he would then become ritually unclean. . .  
 meaning that he could not perform religious duties  
 like saying his prayers or entering the temple. . .  
 nor was he to have any contact with other men  
 until the next day—which began at sunset.

So, in a very real sense, to be ritually unclean or impure  
 was to be excluded from community worship and life—  
 which meant that women were viewed as ritually impure  
 several days of every month and were therefore "ex-communicated"—  
 that is, excluded from the community.  
 The dead, of course, were literally no longer part of the community.

With those understandings in mind, notice what Jesus does  
 when he arrives at the home of Jairus: He touches the dead body  
 of a young woman who is 12 years of age—marry-able age in those days—  
 and thus violates two of the three prohibitions at one time:  
 Touching a dead body and having physical and public contact  
 with a woman who was not his wife.

He **intentionally** touches her and says, *Talitha Cum*—"Little girl; get up!"—  
 and ever since that afternoon, little girls and big ones have been getting up.  
 Little girls and women who have been condemned to spiritual death;  
 who have been trapped in physical or emotional bondage  
 to men and to men's rules for thousands of years--  
 women have heard the words of Jesus, *Talitha Cum*—"Don't let them bury you yet!"—  
 and have been raised from the dead and made alive again.

And if that isn't revolutionary enough, look at what Jesus does next:  
 He turns to the people in the room and says to them, "Give her something to eat."  
 Now, to us that phrase seems insignificant and inconsequential,  
 but in order to grasp the stunning, even shocking, nature of the command he gives,  
 we need to remember that, in that society and at the time,  
 little girls were the most devalued and unimportant of all people.

Men, of course, were most important—at the top of the food chain;  
 women were next; and then came children.  
 Indeed, the Greek word for "child" is *pais*—the same word used for servant or slave.  
 In other words, children were no better and of no more value than servants—  
 and of the children, boys were more important than girls.  
 The role of a girl was to wait on others  
 and then to get out of the way and stay out of sight.

And so, when Jesus says, "Give her something to eat,"  
 he is indulging in a piece of radical role reversal.  
 "You," he says, "father, mother, brothers, adults and boys—  
 you give her something to eat this time; you wait on her for a change."

And that's not the end of Mark's story either, because sandwiched in between  
 the beginning and the end of the story of the raising of the little girl  
 is the story of the woman with the flow of blood.

Now, we don't know why she was constantly bleeding.

Perhaps she had a blood disorder that prevented her blood from clotting up and stopping.

Or perhaps she simply began her monthly menstrual cycle once  
and never stopped bleeding and was always spotting.

What we do know though is that Mark is not a terribly subtle writer,  
and so smacks us upside the head with the revolutionary nature of this Jesus.

I mean, it isn't bad enough that Jesus is on his way  
to risk contamination by contact with a dead body. . .  
the body of a dead female. . . a dead female child.

No, it's not enough that he is in the middle of that scandalous situation,  
but on the way something even worse happens to him.

He is in the middle of a crowd and he suddenly says "Who touched me?"

Notice, he doesn't say "Who bumped into me?" but "Who touched me?"

"Who deliberately touched me?" And who is it?

Well, horror of horrors, it is a Jewish male's worst nightmare:

He, the Rabbi, the Teacher, THE man is touched by a woman. . .

by a woman who is bleeding. Well, that does it!

He's now unclean, impure, finished, outcast,  
not even supposed to be around other men lest he defile them.

And so what does he do? Get angry? Start yelling at the woman?

No. He does here what he does in so many other places and so many other times:

He demonstrates his utter disrespect for the taboos of the law  
by disregarding the rules altogether. . .and puts compassion and mercy  
toward others in need ahead of ritual, legal and religious observances.

Instead of chastising the woman, he commends for her faith  
and publicly announces her healing. . .and, therefore, her restoration to the community—  
the community from which she has been excluded for 12 long and lonely years.

She is now free to go home again. . .to stop being a kind of zombie—  
a walking around dead person. She is alive and free to live again.

Now, why does Mark tell us these stories?

To convince us that Jesus is a nice, sociable, sensible and thoughtful guy  
and that we ought to be the same kind of nice, sociable, sensible and thoughtful people, too?

Uh, uh! Mark tells us this story and all his stories

in order to drive home the good news that in Jesus Christ,

God is acting with power and authority to overthrow superstition,  
oppression and bondage for all people—especially for those  
who are outcast and marginalized, and, in particular, for women.

*Talitha cum*, he says. Now, *talitha* is the Aramaic equivalent  
of *Señorita*, *Mademoiselle*, *Fraülein* or *Miss*—all polite words  
once, and sometimes still, used to address young women or girls.

And so, when Jesus uses the word *Talitha*,  
 he is really addressing more than half the human race:  
 "Be raised to life, women and girls!" he announces.

Speaking with the authority of the voice of the Living and Liberating God,  
 Jesus proclaims: "Women! You are no longer dead! Get up! Arise! And live!"

In China, the previous policy for decades that every family  
 was supposed to have only one child resulted in the phenomenon  
 that only 50% of infant girls survived the first few days of life,  
 whereas over 90% of infant boys survived.  
 Little girl babies were often neglected, exposed to the elements  
 or even secretly put to death so that the family could try again for a boy.

Little girls are still devalued in the world today,  
 and Jesus' voice is still crying, *Talitha cum*.

In various parts of Africa, South Asia and the Middle East,  
 girls are viewed as the property and possessions of men  
 and are subject to all kinds of abuse by their fathers, brothers,  
 husbands and other males in the family as well as in the society at large.  
 And as infants or as women in their early teenage years,  
 their genitals are surgically altered to make later sexual intercourse  
 less pleasurable and more painful—results that make them more acceptable to men  
 regardless of how much suffering and shame it causes the girl.

Young girls are still devalued in the world today  
 and Jesus' voice is still crying, *Talitha cum*.

In many rural parts of India, families are not allowed to eat together.  
 Instead, the man, the husband, eats first because he has a job;  
 the children eat next because they go to school;  
 and the mother—the woman who prepares and serves all this food—  
 she eats last, and frequently only gets the very little that is left.  
 And why is that? "Because," answer the men, "that is way it has always been  
 and the gods have decreed it so."

Little girls and mature women are still devalued in the world today  
 and Jesus is still calling out, *Talitha cum*.

In fundamentalist Christianity, Islam and Judaism, women are treated as second-class citizens,  
 commanded to be subject to the rule of men, ordered to obey laws  
 that keep them in a kind of slavery—laws made by men for the benefit of men.

And Jesus' voice is still crying to them today, *Talitha cum*—  
 "Little girls, young women, older women: You are no longer dead.  
 Get up! Arise! And be made alive!"

Indigenous girls who died and were buried on the grounds of residential schools  
 as well as those who survived their enforced years there. . .  
     added to the hundreds of missing and murdered indigenous women  
     along Highway 16 from Prince George to Prince Rupert  
     as well as at dozens of other places across our land. . .  
     plus all those women of colour whose names are unknown  
     but whose identities, shapes, clothing and faces  
 are mocked or insulted daily on our city streets and sidewalks:  
 little and big girls are still devalued today and Jesus is still reaching out  
 to touch them and raise them up with the words *Talitha cum!*  
*You have value and worth as my sisters: Be alive and be free!*

Truly, as do many in Mark's Gospel, these two stories remind us once again  
 that the Bible in general and the New Testament in particular  
 is a revolutionary document and Jesus is a revolutionary Saviour.

And the good news of revolution he proclaims to all people  
 is that God will ultimately undermine, subvert, and pull down  
 every oppressive system that we create, live in and live under—  
 especially those systems and institutions that many of us  
 who are white, western, male and straight have profited and prospered from.

“Freedom is coming!” Jesus says. “And if you. . .if we. . .aren’t happy  
 with what that new freedom looks like, then we had better get ready  
 to get out of the way! Liberation is at hand!  
 Freedom, healing, wholeness, and new life are here for all!”--  
 whether female or male, cisgender or transgender, queer or not,  
 black or brown or white, poor or rich, outsider or insider,  
 single or partnered, people of faith or people of no faith.

St. Augustine once said: "In all other forms of feeding,  
 we change what we eat into ourselves;  
 but in the eucharist, we are changed by what we eat."  
 In other words, by sharing this food in this meal,  
 we become what we eat: We become the Body of Christ--  
 Christ's Body in the world, living for the world,  
 giving ourselves to the world, for the healing and the rescue of all in the world.

At the table this morning, Jesus does to us what he does to the bread:  
 He takes us, blesses us, breaks us (apart) and then send us out. . .gives us. . .  
 distributes us to the world to bring freedom, wholeness and life to all. . .  
 to all the world and to all in the world. . .  
 even, and especially, to you. . .and to me. . .to us all.

Amen. SDG