

Sunday, June 27, 2021
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 8 (Year B)

Mark 5.21-43

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/329446028730471>

(Sermon begins at about 24:25)

“Life-Changing Encounters”

When I saw what the Gospel for today was, my first thought was, “Great! We are having our first baptism in over a year and a half, and this is the Gospel I have to work with: the story of a hemorrhaging woman sandwiched between the story of a young girl who dies. What am I going to do with that?” And then it hit me.

On the last full day I was in Israel in 2019, our group visited, among other places, the ancient village of Magdala. Home of Mary Magdalene. The original village, now ruins, has been extensively excavated, revealing some exquisite finds. Near the fantastic ruins that have been unearthed, there is also a starkly modern building, Duc in Altum. In addition to an altar shaped like a boat in front of a wall of glass looking out over the Sea of Galilee, Duc in Altum has what’s called the Women’s Atrium, containing seven pillars dedicated to women in the Bible who followed Jesus, and an eighth pillar dedicated to women of all faiths across time. But for me, the most outstanding feature of Duc in Altum is a chapel on the lower level called the Encounter Chapel.

The Encounter Chapel is a simple room with a rough cobbled floor. The floor and part of the walls are excavated portions of the first century marketplace that was a bustling center of activity in the port town of Magdala. At one end of the chapel is an altar made of the same stone as the floor. What is so impressive about this chapel is not so much the floor or the altar, but the mural that is behind the altar. Spanning floor to ceiling and probably a good 15 to 20 feet in length, it is a modern depiction showing the feet of four or five individuals, obviously in a crowded street scene. But all you see of any of the individuals is from about the calf down. Those figures that are visible are dressed in robes like would have been worn in the first century. There is a central figure in a white robe, with the edges of some sort of shawl, not unlike what a rabbi might wear. And extending in amongst the legs of adjacent figures is a delicate hand, index finger extended, barely touching the hem of the white robe. And where the finger touches the robe, there is a burst of light radiating outward. This burst of light, not really that large, maybe a few inches in diameter, is the center of the mural, and serves to draw the viewer into the scene. There were lots of people in that small chapel when we were there, but everyone gazed at the mural in silence, absorbing the significance of the event that was depicted. When a poor, scared woman dared to reach out and touch the hem of Jesus’ robe. When the energy went out of Jesus and healed her.

The Encounter Chapel is so named for two reasons. First, the mural that is the focal point of the room is entitled “Encounter” and obviously depicts the encounter between Jesus and the

woman with the hemorrhages we heard in today's Gospel reading. And second is that the chapel is dedicated to Jesus' encounter with all of us.

Let's step back and take a closer look at the encounter that inspired that mural. And while not depicted in the mural, the story of Jairus' daughter, which the story of the hemorrhaging woman is sandwiched into, is really a part of the larger message. And therefore, integral to our understanding of what is going on here.

In some ways, the primary story is that of Jairus' daughter, with the episode of the hemorrhaging woman being an interlude. Allowing some time to travel to Jairus' home. And more importantly, the encounter with the woman serves to delay Jesus' getting to Jairus' home, during which time the daughter dies. If the woman had not delayed Jesus, he might have gotten there in time and healed the daughter. Of course, that is what appears on the surface. In truth, we know that it is all part of a piece, with the delay allowing an opportunity for Jesus to further demonstrate his abilities—namely to raise the dead to life. So, the two stories need to be taken as a whole.

The Gospel account is a story of faith. Of great faith. Of bold, audacious faith. The story of Jairus and his sick daughter depicting the faith of this prominent leader of the synagogue seeking out Jesus. Jesus, who was often at odds with the leaders of the religious establishment. In reaching out to Jesus, Jairus is making a profound statement of faith in this countercultural, even revolutionary, figure. A statement that could potentially place him at odds with the establishment, with the institution in which he serves as a leader. But his daughter's health is at stake, trumping all other concerns.

But Jairus' faith is nothing compared to that of the hemorrhaging woman. She is desperate. We are told that she has suffered from these hemorrhages for 12 years. During that time, she has sought out whatever remedies she could find to relieve her suffering. To the point that she was now destitute, having spent all her financial resources on physician after physician. Some probably legitimate and some likely charlatans who just took advantage of her suffering, of her desperation. Then she hears about Jesus. If the stories are true, he might be the one to heal her. What did she have to lose? But the day he came to town, the day she would get her chance to seek his healing, the crowds were so large that there would be no way she could get his attention. So, she takes a risk. Again, what did she have to lose? She reaches out and touches the hem of his robe. "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well" (Mk 5.28). And it works! She can feel that she has been healed. Her bold, audacious faith paid off.

Part of what makes her faith bold and audacious was that in even just reaching out to touch Jesus' robe, she was breaking so many laws. A crossing of boundaries between what was considered clean and what was considered unclean. Just the fact that she was a woman daring to touch a man—and not just any man, but a respected teacher—was forbidden. And then there was her illness. Her severe bleeding was probably some form of menstrual irregularity. According to Levitical law, such a constant flow of blood would make her permanently ritually impure. She should not have even been around other people because of the possibility of rendering any she came into contact with ritually impure.

But her bold, audacious faith paid off. She was healed. After touching Jesus' robe and being healed she could have slipped away and no one would be any the wiser. But to her credit, she fessed up. She took responsibility for her infractions against the Jewish purity laws. And in taking that bold step of admitting what she did, Jesus responds, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease" (Mk 5.34). In this statement, Jesus acknowledges her faith as the source of healing. A faith that makes her worthy of being called "daughter," that makes her not a poor, impure woman, but one who is as a beloved child. She had crossed the boundary between clean and unclean. Jesus responded by breaking down the boundary, making clean what had been unclean.

There is another critical crossing of boundaries in the Gospel story. That between life and death. This time, having to do with Jairus' daughter. Another beloved child. By the time Jesus gets to Jairus' house, the child is dead. This time, Jesus is the one crossing boundaries. "He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum' . . . 'Little girl, get up!'" (Mk 5.41). Jesus touched a dead body. Another act that under Levitical law rendered the offender ritually impure. But Jesus did not care. Here was one who should not be dead. One in need of being brought back to life. And he was able to make that happen. Crossing the boundary between clean and unclean. Doing so to not just cross the boundary between life and death, but to break down the boundary between life and death.

Today we have the joy of baptizing Molly Jo Kuchinad. So, what do the events of today's Gospel—a hemorrhaging woman who is healed and a girl brought back to life—have to do with Molly and her baptism? Everything. Today's Gospel reading is actually a perfect story for baptism.

Baptism is a bold, audacious statement of faith. Not unlike the action of the woman, reaching out to Jesus for what only he could provide—healing, wholeness, salvation. When we decide to be baptized—or in this case, when Molly's parents act on her behalf and decide to have her baptized—we are making a bold, audacious statement of faith in what Jesus can provide for us. Even though we may be unworthy of what he has to offer. Yet trusting that the gift will be bestowed freely and without hesitation. That in the act of baptism, Jesus says "My beloved child, your faith has made you whole."

And like our Gospel story, going into and rising out of the waters of baptism is a crossing of boundaries. Us crossing boundaries. Jesus crossing boundaries to make it happen. Baptism is a crossing of the boundaries between clean and unclean. We go into the water unclean, sinful beings. Maybe not so much a six-month-old child. Nonetheless, a recognition of the inherent sinfulness we carry as flawed human beings. But when we come out of the waters of baptism, we are transformed. We come out clean, our sins forever forgiven. Baptism is also a crossing of the boundary between life and death. Going into the water we die to our old way of life—a life that ends in death. And we emerge, reborn to a new life with Christ. A new and eternal life as a member of the Body of Christ. A new and eternal life as a beloved member of Christ's family.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus' healing of the woman was a life-changing encounter for her. Jesus' raising of Jairus' daughter was a life-changing encounter for her and her entire family. In our

own baptisms, each of us has a life-changing encounter with Jesus. In a couple of minutes, Molly will have her life-changing encounter with Jesus. And in so doing, will lay the foundation of her life, that she may grow into a woman of faith. A woman whose life and witness will now be forever represented by that eighth pillar in the Women's Atrium at Duc in Altum—the one dedicated to women of all faiths across time.

So, let's facilitate a life-changing encounter with Jesus, shall we?