Impossible is a Dare
Mark 5:21-43
28 June 2015

Last week we talked about the stilling of the storm and the ways we can react to the fear that we feel. This week we are going to look at faith.

Our passage begins with Jesus and the disciples in their boat crossing to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. If you're thinking, “Wait a minute, weren’t they just crossing to the other side?” Good catch! They so were! The lectionary skips over the story following the storm in which Jesus heals a Gentile man and picks up as Jesus and the disciples get back into the boat. Today’s text is another Markan “sandwich” where one story starts, another breaks in, and then the first story finishes. So, off we go - back to the other side, back home, back to a story I referenced last week.

Listen for a Word from God.

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I need to say one thing about this story before I go any further. I tried to figure out how to work it in smoothly into the rest of the sermon, but the truth is that I want to make sure this doesn’t get lost. I want to make sure that you hear this, even if you hear nothing else in what I say from here forward.

The woman suffering from hemorrhages is praised for her faith and healed because of it. That does not mean that if you, or someone you love, is sick that it is because they just don’t have enough faith.

The little girl in this text is brought back to life after Jesus tells her father not to be afraid but to believe. That does not mean that if you or someone you love has lost a daughter (or son, or dad, or whomever) that it is because you did not believe well enough, or hard enough, or in the right way.

This is not a mathematical equation. It is not: If A, then B; if this is true, then this other thing must also be true. No. There are times that the Bible, religion, the world requires us to hold two things in our minds at once without demanding that one cancel out or impose something on the other.

We have seen that no more clearly than in this astounding week.

On Friday alone I “liked” 482 posts (approximately) on Facebook after the Supreme Court decision to allow all people in all 50 states to marry whomever they wish. Then I went over to watch the live-stream of the funeral for Rev. Clementa Pinckney in Charleston, SC. Those two things had to exist in my mind at once without demanding that one cancel out or impose something on the other. Instead I was
reminded of Margaret’s text from Ezra a few weeks ago in which joy and weeping mingled together “so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping.”¹ In some ways each of these events exists on their own, and yet I do think that each one is heard differently in light of the other - sort of like the Markan “sandwich,” where we hear one story a little differently for having the other one smushed in with it.²

The Supreme Court decision must be celebrated, and I cannot help but be buoyed by the possibilities opened up for so many with the advent of marriage equality; but when I read it through the lens of Charleston, I am reminded of increased violence against our trans* loved ones, of issues in our healthcare system and in our family and church systems. Charleston reminds me of the work that must still be done to create a world in which all people feel valued and safe.

In the same way, the murder of 9 people in bible study has to be condemned - our hearts should continue to break over the fear that is perpetually stoked in people of color in this country; but when I read it through the lens of #lovewins, I am reminded that impossible is a dare, it is not a fact.³ #lovewins reminds me that racist flags have never been pulled so fast, that God’s grace is amazing, and that faith is an antidote to fear.

You can take these two stories apart, just as you can take the sandwiched stories in Mark apart, but they tell us a more complete story together. They remind us of what Audre Lord said, that “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”

If we take our story today apart, we see a man whose daughter was healed and a woman who herself was healed. But if we keep them together, we see that Jesus, on the way to help one person, stops to create a healing relationship with another - that no one is outside of Jesus’ attention and care. We see that even as he walks with the rich man, he cannot ignore the touch of the poor woman. We see that Jesus is not interested in serving the social order, in catering only to those with power and influence but that he is about binding up the wounded. He is interested in restoration, not just healing because otherwise he could have just kept on walking. The woman’s hemorrhaging stops with the touch of his cloak - that’s a miracle worth recording - but when we hear her story within the news of Jairus’ daughter, it becomes clear that Jesus’ goal was not just to stop her bleeding, but to bring this woman back to life.

If we take our story today apart, we see a father and a woman reach out to a man

¹ Ezra 3:13. Thanks to the sermon and insights from Margaret Fox on 6/14/2015 - http://goo.gl/oysr2r
² Sandwich reference from my sermon at CCC on 6/7/2015 - http://goo.gl/cVQ8Yh
³ Taken from this longer quote: “Impossible is just a big word thrown around by small men who find it easier to live in the world they’ve been given than to explore the power they have to change it. Impossible is not a fact. It’s an opinion. Impossible is not a declaration. It’s a dare. Impossible is potential. Impossible is temporary. Impossible is nothing." - Possibility by Muhammad Ali. Definitely in The New York Regional Mormon Singles Halloween Dance by Elna Baker. Uncertain as to true origin...
they pray can help them. But if we keep them together, the urgency of each one is more vivid, and the boundaries they both cross are more stark. Even without knowing all the background about bleeding women as unclean, without knowing her isolation and her restrictions, her fear makes the risk this woman takes quite clear and it highlights the risk Jairus is taking too. Through him we see that love will fight against the forces of death at all costs - even if it could get you removed as a leader in your faith community, even if it could get you blotted off all the lists, even if it means that you will be ridiculed - laughed at - if the risk of faith that you take, fails.

Neither of these stories describes precisely the faith of these believers; there is nothing here about the content of their faith, nothing of doctrine, nothing of creed. But both of the stories show us the contours of faith, the energy and the power of faith. Both of them revolve around people who take a chance, who decide to trust and to hope, who turn to Jesus and make a bold move for healing - for themselves and the ones they love.

And that is the kind of faith I want to live.

I want to live a faith that is already waiting by the shore for Jesus to arrive. I want to live a faith that says,

“Come with me because I know that an encounter with God can bring new life.”

I want to live a faith that shouts in public and wakes me up from my deepest sleep. I want to live a faith that helps me break the rules when they need to be broken, a faith that isn’t afraid to risk, a faith with tenacity that invites me to face my fears and tell the whole truth. I want to live a faith that says, “Even just a brush with Jesus can help me heal.” One that recognizes that after years of effort and countless remedies tried that some of God’s children reached out to touch Christ’s hem, and on Friday the bleeding stopped, and nothing is the same as it was.

And I want a faith that remembers Saturday morning when another woman who couldn’t wait any longer for wholeness to come reached out hoping for the same kind of miracle... [video of Bree Newsome]. For that miracle we still wait. But if our sandwiched stories tell us anything, it is that flag will come down. And when it does (or even before it does) more steps of faith must be taken.

Just as Jesus’ story doesn’t end when that little girl gets up, ours doesn’t either because after the flag comes down we need to take down the number of people of color incarcerated in this nation. After the flag comes down we need to take down the unemployment numbers of people of color in this nation. After the flag comes down we need to take down the barriers that keep families in detention centers, that divide parents from their children. After the flag comes down we need to take down the health care blockades that still exist for poor and trans* people in this nation. After the flag comes down we need take down statutes that allow GLBT folks to be fired or denied housing in many places in Kentucky and beyond. And...and...and...

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4 https://youtu.be/LYgbwbmsHfw
Karl Barth, a famous German theologian, is often quoted as saying something like, “We must hold the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other,” but he didn’t say it quite that way. What he said to some young theologians was “to take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.” If we do that then the bad news is that we have a world of work to do, but the good news is that you are alive to do it.

The good news is that the bleeding can be stopped.
The good news is that restoration is possible.
The good news is that our faith is built on the impossible.

So make your way to the shore and fight your way through the crowd.
Take a chance.
Make a bold move.
Things might never be the same.

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5 The actual quote is from a Time Magazine article on Barth from May 31, 1963. More can be found at: http://www.ptsem.edu/Library/index.aspx?menu1_id=6907&menu2_id=6904&id=8450