

June 28, 2015 – Celebration Sunday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Mark 5:21-43

One Story

Jairus is a synagogue leader, a respected member of the community, an official in charge of worship who is in need of healing for his daughter, who is on the point of death. As Jesus goes to help Jairus, he is delayed—even, it may seem, distracted. On the way there's a woman, who interrupts his journey. This woman's body has been falling apart, hemorrhaging, for 12 years. Now she reaches out to touch Jesus. If only she can only touch Jesus, if she can only make that step, if she can only step up now...

Our Step Up Now Capital Campaign has been so on my mind I am seeing it overlaid upon the gospel reading. There's where we are now, the official house of worship, an upstanding member of the community, considering questions of health; we're not on the point of death, but as so many churches today are, we are thinking about our well-being, our continuity, our future. And then we've got this other body, this building, that's been falling apart, hemorrhaging bricks...the gym. In a way it has been reaching out for help.

In the gospel story, when the woman steps forward, when she reaches out and touches Jesus, he pauses. There's something shocking about this, about this public account of such a private illness, constant bleeding. It must have taken incredible bravery for the woman to do this, to even venture outside, having lived with this debilitating condition for twelve long years. Because of it, she's not just unwell, but ritually unclean, not accepted in her community. There's something shocking, too, about the time that Jesus takes with her, the attention he pays her. When you consider that he is on his way to see a dying girl, it may sound like a distraction, that Jesus pauses, and keeps asking who touched him. "How can you possibly know who touched you?" his disciples ask. There's a sense, perhaps, that they want him to get on to more official business.

But Jesus pauses, keeps asking, who touched him? Not because he's distracted, or annoyed by the interruption, but because there is something more that needs to happen. Jesus' journey will not continue until the woman who has touched him steps up yet again, until she comes out of the margins, until she says that it is she who touched him. Jesus asks that question, because there is yet more healing to come. The woman comes forward, trembling. When others have made you to feel worthless, it is hard to come out, hard to have pride. Yet despite her fear, this woman steps forward, and she is healed not just of illness, but of being shunted aside, and of the shame that causes. When Jesus asks who touched him, he creates an opportunity for this woman to not just be made well, but to be publically welcomed, to step up and be recognized as a part of the community. She is made well, she is restored to the community, not just as a member, but as a model, an exemplar of faith, faith that steps forward through fear.

Jesus continues his journey to the house of Jairus. "Don't bother," some onlookers say, don't bother going to the house of the worship official, "You're too late. She's dead." Jesus will have none of that. He says to Jairus, the girl's father, who is surely also trembling, to the girl's him Jesus says, "Do not fear." God says that again and again in the Bible. "Do not fear."

But there's more to it. There's more to what Jesus says here than "Do not fear." The statement is in the continuous tense, has an ongoing sense. That is, what he says is not just "do not fear," but "Stop being afraid." It has a continuous tense, and ongoing sense, because fear is not something you can just drop. No, Jesus is saying here, fear is a way of acting, a way of behaving, a way of being to leave behind. "Stop being afraid," Jesus says, stop doing that, and be

doing something else: “Only believe.” Only believe, and even more, “keep believing.” There’s an ongoing sense to this as well, for faith is not just something you just have, but something you do, continuously. It’s an action. A word with an unspoken “ing.” Jesus is calling Jairus, calling us, out of a state of continuous anxiety, to a state of continuous trust, “Stop being afraid, and keep believing.” Keep trusting. Keep hoping. Keep stepping forward.

Keep acting—even in the face of death. Jesus reaches out and touches it. Jesus touches death, takes it by the hand. As the woman touched him, so Jesus reaches out and touches the little girl, takes her by the hand, and heals her, Jairus’s daughter.

She was about twelve years old. The detail appears at the end of the story, parenthetically, as if an interruption, or a distraction. None of that. Jairus’s daughter was twelve years old, like the twelve years that woman had been bleeding, that woman whom Jesus restored, and called, “Daughter.” These two stories are one story: the long suffering woman, the girl on the brink of womanhood, the church official, the unclean outcast. One story, on the journey Jesus takes, of the healing Jesus makes. From fear and trembling, to trust and healing, restoration is a continuous action: stop being afraid, keep believing, step out in faith.

At a recent Property Team meeting—all of our recent meetings, of course, are overlaid with the Gym, we talked about the new doors for the front of it. There’ll be four instead of two, and the new doors will have windows in them. And there’ll be new windows on the side of the gym, too, much bigger ones, it will look more open and inviting, welcoming. These are, in fact, efforts at restoration, returning the façade to how it appeared when it was first built. So we were talking about this, what it would look like, what it had looked like, and we pulled out this book. It was put together to mark the 35th anniversary of IPLC, back in 1938. There’s lots of different pictures in this book, of people gathered at the church for various occasions, and of various buildings, including this one, of the gym. And next to it, there’s a paragraph about fear and faith. It’s about the decision to build the gym in the first place. The book says: “In 1933 we realized the need for additional space for the Church School. We hesitated because the general business conditions were unsatisfactory.” You’ll remember what was happening in the U.S. economy in 1933. And, in fact, the book notes, in 1933, the church’s annual offerings dropped by almost half. Still, they decided to plan for the new building. The next year, church offerings rose, almost covering half the difference. Then they deliberated for a year, didn’t do anything, and when they didn’t act, offerings dropped again. The next year they went forward with the project, and church offerings consistently increased. The health of the church, the project for the gym: one story.

Of course, our history book said, it’s not just about money, but it’s a part of it, too. It’s a way of being faithful. St. Paul says that, too, in the Bible, in today’s fitting reading from the letter the Corinthians. Paul writes, “Now as you excel in everything, in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in eagerness, in love, excel also in generosity.” You have done that, no let me say that with the correct verb tense, you are doing that, continuously, here. Thank you. Thank you to young people, and old people, and new people, and daughters, and fathers, and church officials, and people outside the community. Thank you. Thank you for stepping forward, and continuing the journey with Jesus.