**The Sound of Faith**

Psalm 130  
Mark 5:21-43

Even though it is one of the most frequently quoted verses from the Gospel of Matthew, I have always been a little troubled by the expression “the least of these”. Matthew is nearing the end of his Gospel and wants to make it unambiguously clear that Christian faith calls us to see those who are marginalized, the hungry, the homeless, the ill and the imprisoned as part of the family of God. “Just as you cared for the least of these, who are members of my family, - you cared for me.” I wish Jesus had chosen an expression other than “least of these” because it tends to evoke for me anyway a feeling of pity and a strong sense that some people will always be the receivers and never the givers. The least of these are those who are on the margins of society and are utterly dependent on our compassion.

Yet, in spite of these reservations about this way of characterizing a person, I would have been hard pressed to find a better way of describing the woman, Cherokee Park United Church confirmands and I met in the homeless center in Atlanta last week. If anyone qualifies as the “least of these” about whom Jesus speaks, it would be her. Not only is she a homeless, African American woman, but she also appeared to be a person with significant mental disabilities. You could tell from the expression on her face and the manner in which she moved about the Center that this is a person who is extremely vulnerable and you wondered how does she survive? “Just as you cared for the least of these…” says Jesus.

The staff person at the Gateway Center for the homeless with whom we met before beginning our time of volunteering did bring the helpful reminder that we should always guard against any feelings of judgment about the people with whom we met. Each of them she said has their own life story about which we know very little. We do not know what circumstances have brought them here today. We do not know what losses they have known, what type of day they have had, whether they had a place to sleep the night before. Essentially she was reminding us that in caring for and about the “least of these” we should always remember there is a context to their lives. No single snap shot of the person can tell the story about who he or she is. Their lives, her life only makes sense as part of a larger narrative.

Thankfully, context and larger narrative, was on the mind of a majority of Supreme Court justices as they made critical decisions this week about the Affordable Care Act and Marriage equality. In both instances they refused to read the law passed by Congress and the Constitution as if they somehow existed with a life of their own apart from and separated from context and larger narrative. Chief Justice Roberts writing about the Affordable Care Act said, “that the words must be understood as part of a larger statutory plan. In this instance, the context and structure of the act compel us to depart from what would otherwise be the most natural reading of the pertinent statutory phrase.” Justice Kennedy writing about the Marriage Equality ruling stated, “The limitation of marriage to opposite-sex couples may long have seemed natural and just, but its inconsistency with the central meaning of the fundamental right to marry is now manifest.” Recognizing that our understanding about sexual orientation and gender identity has shifted immensely in recent years, Kennedy argues that this context now matters for how we interpret the Constitution.

Without question, context and the larger narrative of U.S. racial history matters when it comes to the many funerals being held this past week for the 9 African American martyrs whose lives were taken by a young angry white man steeped in and shaped by hatred and the belief in white supremacy. If there was no larger narrative, there would be no need to talk about removing the confederate flag. If there was no larger narrative there would be no need to talk about voting rights and economic inequality. But, this context of racial superiority is woven into the very fabric of our history, culture, laws and institutions. No single snap shot of a lone angry white man can explain what happened in Charleston.

Context and narrative matter when it comes to interpreting Scripture. There are, of course, many Christians, who like Justices Scalia, Alito and Thomas operate on the premise that they can isolate a particular phrase or passage and somehow in that isolation grasp the meaning that’s intended. Scripture finds its depth and meaning in the context in which it was written, the context of our day and the broader narrative of God’s love, justice and grace that runs throughout the telling of God’s journey with God’s people.

Our lesson today is a prime example. Two stories are woven together, each of which expose the vulnerability so evident in the homeless woman we met at the Gateway Center in Atlanta. One tells us about a man of authority, quite likely less familiar with the experience of vulnerability. He is a leader of the synagogue. People know Jairus by name. Yet, his daughter is deathly ill. Unexpectedly and suddenly Jarius has come face to face with his own vulnerability and that of his daughter. The other story is about a woman who has impoverished herself trying to find healing for an illness that has been without cure. No one seems to know her name. She is alone, ill, impoverished.

Vulnerability is woven into the context of this story for Jairus and the woman who suffers. For the woman, the vulnerability and isolation is systemic, becoming a part of the culture and practices of the day, much like vulnerability and isolation have their own systemic manifestations in our time. A woman with a bleeding disorder was seen as unclean and cut off from the rest of society.

The broader Biblical narrative in this story is found in the number 12. In Scripture, 12 is one of those symbolic numbers intended to remind us that God’s wholeness, God’s Realm of justice is experienced in and through community, 12 tribes of Israel, 12 Disciples. It is no coincidence that the daughter of Jarius is 12 years old and the woman has had a bleeding disorder for 12 years. The number 12 reminds us that these two stories of healing are given their meaning through the broader narrative of how God is at work in our world calling us into communities of healing, wholeness, justice and grace. Not just in Palestine, not just in Charleston, not just in Washington D.C., but a community of healing, wholeness, justice and grace, right here on St. Paul’s West Side.

It is in the midst of his vulnerability that Jairus drops to his knees in front of Jesus, imploring Jesus to come and lay his hands on Jairus’s daughter so that his daughter might live. As Jesus travels with Jairus, the woman made penniless and vulnerable by her years of affliction sees Jesus coming and in an act of desperation, pushes and shoves through a crowd of people, saying to herself, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.”

As we know from the story the woman is healed, but what is truly amazing is when Jesus turns to the woman and says, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace”. What faith is Jesus talking about? To us it looks like an act of complete desperation, a grasp at the last little hope available to her. How can Jesus call this faith? Could it be that Jesus wants this woman to know, Jesus wants us to know that our faith, no matter how big or how small is a critical ingredient to God’s grace filled, justice oriented, healing presence in our world? If we are feeling vulnerable, if we are feeling uncertain, if we are afraid, if it seems life is collapsing all around us, we can in faith reach out to a power and a strength that is greater than our own. This is what President Obama was talking about in his eulogy for Rev. Pinckney. God’s grace is there for us all, the critical question is, are we willing to respond and live by that grace? We may not be physically healed of an illness, but we can be healed of the isolation, the desperation, the hopelessness.

As Jesus is speaking to the woman, people come up to Jairus and say, “no need to have Jesus come with you, your daughter has died.” Overhearing these words Jesus turns to Jairus and says, “Do not fear, only believe, only have faith.” There is no quantification of how much faith. Jesus once said that faith the size of a tiny mustard seed can do amazing things.

That journey home must have been a long one for Jairus, feeling like an eternity with doubts and uncertainties pressing in on him from every side. It is the same journey that has been walked by LGBT sisters and brothers from the Stonewall Uprising in New York City to the steps of the Supreme Court building this past Friday, along the way filled with uncertainty and doubt, difficult to imagine a time such as now. It is the same journey from Selma to Charleston, with a few signs of progress, but yet a long road yet to travel if the nation is to know real justice. It is the same journey of anyone who experiences the vulnerability of health, financial debt, vocational uncertainty, broken relationships. Just this past Friday, Michele and I were woken at 5:00 a.m. by a young woman standing on the street corner outside of our home, weeping. We got up and spoke with her. A relationship had gone badly. Her vulnerability was impossible to hide. To the vulnerable, which is all of us who stand in need of the grace of God, Jesus says, your faith will make you well, your faith will see you through”. “Do not fear, believe”.

Some of you know that our organ has been out of commission for a couple weeks. It suddenly just quit. Stefan Sylvander risked life and limb, crawling around in the attic right above our heads to discover the problem. There is a cable that runs from the organ console to the pipes behind you. Apparently a squirrel chewed through the cable; at least that was the most logical conclusion suggested by the stiff squirrel Stefan found. Jim Shatek and Stefan have since connected a new cable running above the false ceiling in the Fellowship Hall. The organ console, is impressive. The pipes have been beautifully laid out and they too are impressive. You don’t even see the cable, but without that cable there is no sound.

I am suggesting this morning that faith is like that cable running between the power source of the organ console and the pipes that create the sound, both for us as individuals and for all of us gathered into this community of faith. Justice is the sound of faith. Healing is the sound of faith. Forgiveness, like that given witness by the people of Emanuel A.M.E. is the sound of faith. Compassion is the sound of faith. Living with hope, when there appears little reason for hope, is the sound of faith. When through faith we are connected to the console of God’s love, the sounds of faith will be heard.

Before we left the Gateway Center for the homeless, we had an opportunity to reflect on our experience. I mentioned the vulnerable woman I had seen. Our guide, Rebecca, stopped everything, left the room and then came back with the woman about whom I had been speaking. She went by name of Sweet Pea. Rebecca said that Sweet Pea had a song she would like to sing. We sat quietly as she sang from the bottom of her heart, a song that had refrains from a number of Gospel tunes, none of which totally fit together, but was unquestionably an expression of her faith.

This sound of joy and hope was a gift of faith none of us expected to receive from someone who is among the least of these and Jesus says is part of our family.

**Psalm 130**

*The strong witness given by members of Emanuel AME in Charleston is captured by our first lesson from the Psalm. In spite of ample reason for hatred and bitterness, the people of Emanuel AME, like the Psalmist, put their faith in a God forgiveness, whose redeeming power is the source of hope.*

Out of the depths I cry to you, O God. O God, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! If you, O God, should mark iniquities, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. I wait for God, my soul waits, and in God's word I hope; my soul waits for God more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. O Israel, hope in God! For with God there is steadfast love, With God is great power to redeem. It is God who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

**Mark 5:21-43**

*Our second lesson tells the story of the healing presence evident in Jesus being extended once again to the vulnerable. First to a man who is concerned about his seriously ill daughter. On the way to his home, they are interrupted by a woman who has an illness that has left her impoverished. Jesus responds to both as members of his own family.*

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."  
  
While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!' And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.