

Rev. Lynne Ogren Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
July 1, 2018 6th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B Mark 5:21-43

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

This week more than 30,000 Lutheran teenagers and adults have gathered in Houston for the triennial ELCA Youth Gathering. The theme this year is “This Changes Everything”. Each day had its own mini-focus to define what “this” is, like God’s call, love, or grace changes everything. The Lutheran camps are using this same theme this summer so you’ll hear more about it after our Zion kids and I go to Flathead later this month.

Today in Houston the culminating focus that pulls all the others together is “Jesus Changes Everything.” It’s also a good title for the passage from Mark we heard today. Everyone in this story is changed by Jesus—even those of us who read it so many centuries later.

Before we look at the people who are changed, let’s notice how Jesus goes about the business of changing lives. Our reading today began with the introduction, “When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side...” meaning the other side of the Sea of Galilee. One side of the sea was home to the Jews and the other to the Gentiles. Crossing the sea indicates that Jesus is crossing boundaries.

And even though he is coming back from the Gentile side to the Jewish side in our gospel reading today, he still encounters boundaries that separate and isolate people from one another.

The first person we meet is Jairus. He is a man of importance in the community. As a leader of the synagogue he was more like a mayor than a religious leader. But he would have noticed Jesus who had done some amazing healings in the synagogue before—so amazing that the religious leaders were conspiring to “destroy” him. My guess is that in order to preserve his reputation Jairus would not normally have paid too much attention to Jesus.

Jesus was weird. He spoke with an authority the church leaders didn’t understand. And he hung out with the least desirable people.

So what would make this man who had clout and probably wealth literally fall at Jesus’ feet? What would make him cross all those boundaries to get to Jesus? Desperation and fear. His daughter was dying and anyone who knows what it’s like to have a child critically ill or who have experienced the death of a child, know that desperation makes us do crazy things.

But Jairus’ story is interrupted by someone so unlike him, an unnamed woman. And this time she is not desperate for a loved one, she is desperate for herself. Women at that time were isolated from society during their monthly menstrual periods because they were considered unclean. This woman’s condition of continuous bleeding had kept her isolated from her community for 12 long years.

Not only socially isolated, she was now poor having spent all her money on so-called physicians who only made her condition worse. Now, in contrast to a prominent man, whose name we know, seeking Jesus' help, we have an unnamed poor sick woman who crosses all these boundaries by pushing her way through the pressing crowd just to touch the hem of Jesus' clothing. And when he finally discovers who drew the healing power from him, she too falls at his feet.

Jairus and the woman cross social, political, and economic boundaries to get to Jesus. But, really, it was the Holy Spirit who drew these two to Jesus—like a magnet. It was the Spirit at work in Jesus who called, gathered, and shined the light of hope to pull these desperate, hurting people across those invisible yet very real boundaries to get to Jesus to save them.

Do any of these boundaries sound familiar to us in our day? We are living in a time of great division in our country and globally as well. We have labels that really don't mean much apart from the value we give them. Wealthy, poor. White, black, brown. Republican, Democrat. Young, old. Mentally ill, homeless, immigrant, foreign, native, American, illegal... I'm sure you can think of others.

Often our labels serve only to separate us, to divide us, and in many cases also to isolate us. But even these labels that name the larger cultural divisions of our day draw our attention from seemingly simpler labels or conditions that are just as painful and isolating.

Thomas Jefferson is quoted as saying, "I never considered a difference of opinion in politics, in religion, in philosophy, as cause for withdrawing from a friend." Certainly our opinions can serve as boundaries that divide rather than opportunities to learn and grow from one another.

We have our stereotypes that we place on others. We have all heard generalizations made about Native American communities, the Hutterites, the Amish, as well as any number of other ethnic or religious groups. Our assumptions about people who are different from ourselves serve only to separate and isolate us from one another.

Jesus saw no difference between the prominent man and the unnamed woman. Both were worthy of his attention, of his healing power, and of his love. Jesus did not hold Jairus' prejudices toward Jesus and his disciples against him. Jesus did not find the poor, bleeding woman to be unclean or unworthy.

Sometimes we isolate ourselves. People often stay away from worship and church activities when the going gets rough. We don't want people to know that our child—or that we ourselves—are suffering with addictions. In our grief we are afraid that our tears might draw too much attention and people will feel uncomfortable. We are ashamed that we had to file for bankruptcy or lost our job or our marriage is falling apart and we just can't face our church community.

These, my friends, are the times when we must gather together. This and every Christian community serves as the Body of Christ today. When the Holy Spirit pulls on your heart to cross those boundaries, we as a community are also called to reach across them and draw people back to receive the love and care that come from Jesus.

It is our calling to pay attention to those who are on the sidelines. Who used to come to Zion and doesn't anymore? Why not? A phone call or a caring question can serve as the call of the Spirit to draw them back to this community who gathers around Jesus.

The final boundary that is crossed in our gospel reading today is when Jesus enters the home of Jairus and touches the hand of his daughter. The girl was dead, but Jesus crosses the boundary of death to bring forth new life.

We know that not everyone is physically healed in this life. We know that death is still very real. A man who was diagnosed with Parkinson's once said that he was not healed of Parkinson's but Jesus healed him of his fear of Parkinson's. We also know that the healing we most often need is the healing of divisions and fears and isolation.

Death comes to us in many ways—death of a relationship, death of a dream, death of career. In these, and in the physical deaths of those we love, Jesus comes to us to take our hand and lead us into new life. And it is by the power of Jesus that is at work in and among us as the people of God that we can give witness to the truth that Jesus changes everything.

Let us pray.

Power of the eternal Father, help me.

Wisdom of the Son, enlighten the eye of my understanding.

Tender mercy of the Holy Spirit, unite my heart to yourself.

Eternal God, restore health to the sick and life to the dead.

Give us a voice, your own voice, to cry out to you for mercy for the world.

You, light, give us light.

You, wisdom, give us wisdom.

You, supreme strength, strengthen us. Amen

(Prayer of Catherine of Siena)