

ONA Sunday Sermon
Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash
June 27, 2021

Mark 5:21-43

21When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him;

and he was by the sea. 22Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet 23and 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.”

24So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. 25Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. 26She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. 27She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, 28for she said,

“If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” 29Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt

in her body that she was healed of her disease. 30Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” 31And his disciples said

to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” 32He looked

all around to see who had done it. 33But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. 34He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

35While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader’s house to say, “Your daughter is

dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?” 36But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe.” 37He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. 38When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. 39When he had entered, he

said to them, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.”

40And 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. 41He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!” 42And immediately the girl got up

and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. 43He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Prayer

Sermon

Friends, in today's passage Mark tells us the story of two of Jesus' healings. Mark is fond of intertwining related stories in order to make a point. In fact, this passage is a twist within a braid. There's a lot going on. You remember last week's passage had Jesus taking his disciples across the Sea of Galilee, and calming the storm. That passage was symbolic: going from a predominantly Jewish community on one side of the lake, to the other side of the lake, where he ministered in a Gentile community and called out a demon from a Gerasene man. In other words, Mark highlights that Jesus ministered to people of vastly different backgrounds - and people whom society deemed unworthy. Now, in the country of the Gerasenes, Jesus was not applauded for his actions, indeed he was asked to leave town. And that's where today's passage begins. When Jesus had crossed the lake again, and was back in Jewish territory, the crowds came. They knew Jesus had a gift. And two people came seeking healing. One for his daughter, one for herself. Jesus healed the woman bleeding for twelve straight years, and the girl, just twelve years old. Indeed Jesus raised the girl, and power went out from him to the woman. Twelve, the number associated with them both, signals to us a connection to the Jewish community, the tribes of Israel.

I want to acknowledge that this story of two people miraculously healed sounds unbelievable to modern ears. And, let me acknowledge, too, the pain you might feel hearing this story, if you have prayed with all your heart for healing for someone you love, only to see their suffering continue. These two very difficult aspects of this story I'm going to leave for another day, because I want to pull out a very specific piece of this passage that I think is very important and very good news for us, this Pride month and this ONA Sunday.

I'm talking about the unnamed woman who touched Jesus' cloak in search of healing.

I used to focus on this woman's problems: twelve years of disease; she spent all her resources on doctors who didn't help; purity laws put her on the outside of her community.

This week, I noticed something different.

For twelve years, she sought healing. She never gave up. She believed healing could be found and that she was worthy of healing. She endured. She persisted. And when she heard that this wonderful teacher and healer was nearby, she found a way to get to him because she knew healing was possible. She busted through the community norms. She believed in herself, and friends I think that has to be some part of Jesus calling her Daughter and saying, "your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." With fear and trembling, which you could also translate with awe and reverence, she proclaimed what Jesus had done for her.

Which brings me to today. On this ONA Sunday we proclaim that everyone is worthy of God's love and our love, too. And on this ONA Sunday we join in a choir of voices, members of our congregation, staff, family members, friends, and all the voices of our LGBTQIA+ siblings who boldly and persistently declare that we are all beautiful, beloved, and worthy.

Since numbers are important in these this morning's stories of healing - the number twelve indicating that something holy and important is going on - let me shift, on this Open and Affirming Sunday, to some numbers.

In 1984 something happened in Massachusetts: our UCC conference at the time passed a resolution to become the first Open and Affirming conference in our denomination. A year later our national General Synod passed a similar resolution. Our polity says that what the wider church does cannot dictate what the local church does - so then it became a matter of discernment for each congregation.

Here at Pilgrim, in 2000-2002, a woman named Martha Kimball, whom so many folks are remembering this month for her welcome and inclusion, was among the leaders of our discernment. And there were many more folks on the Opening Hearts and Minds Committee, folks who drafted our ONA statement, and many more who participated in discussions and prayerful decision making and the congregational vote.

In 2002 there was an overwhelming yes vote by the congregation, Pilgrim Congregational Church, United Church of Christ of Lexington earned a number:

438. This congregation is the 438th Open and Affirming Congregation in the United Church of Christ. Nearly 20 years later there are 1700+ ONA congregations around the country, out of just under 5000 churches, around a third.¹ More than half of UCC churches in Massachusetts are ONA. Today, churches that are Open and Affirming are more likely, statistically, to be growing in size and participation. But that is not why we became Open and Affirming nor why we proclaim it regularly now. There are far more important reasons to be Open and Affirming.

(slide show?)

We are open and affirming because it's core to our congregation's values.

We think the body of Christ is incomplete when we don't make our welcome plain and invite everyone to the table.

We are open and affirming because there have been, and are folks in our congregation, in our families, on our staff who are LGBTQIA+ and we want to be clear and public in our welcome.

We are open and affirming because we want to witness to Christ's extravagant welcome.

¹ <https://www.sneucc.org/blogdetail/todays-open-and-affirming-is-more-than-just-queer-15284287>

We are open and affirming because we support the rights of our LGBTQIA+ siblings, and you know that work is not over.

And for me, here is the most important reason: we are Open and Affirming because being so has the potential to save lives.

The Trevor Project - the group made famous this week when our confirmands invited this church to support in honor of their confirmation this year - The Trevor Project reports that “LGBTQ youth who report having at least one accepting adult were 40% less likely to report a suicide attempt in the past year.”²

As an ONA church our children know:

- their parents have chosen to be in an LGBTQIA+ inclusive community.
- their pastor and their Christian Educator and their Sunday School teachers have chosen to be in an ONA community.
- high school students among us are stepping up to educate and model welcome
- and that means our kids have trusted, supportive, and accepting older teens and adults here.

When a queer kid comes looking for inclusion and welcome and love, they’re going to find it here, or in the ONA congregation they are part of.

A couple of months ago, one of you asked me for a church for a family friend whose grandchild is trans. Because of the network of ONA churches I knew where to send that beloved grandchild and their family. (First, of course, I invited them here - but they live too far away.)

I recall walking with First Church Somerville, just a year after that church became Open and Affirming, in the (at the time) tiny group of churches that joined the Boston Pride parade. With beaming smiles and rainbow scarves, we declared God loves you and so do we! to the folks gathered on the sidewalks. In those late 90s days, our proclamation was met with surprise, with tears, with joy.

It was not that the folks lined up along the parade route didn’t think they were beautiful and worthy of love: it’s that they didn’t know there were churches who agreed with them.

But now, thanks to congregations like Pilgrim that have chosen to boldly and clearly proclaim our welcome, inclusion and support of LGBTQIA+ folks, it is not hard to find an inclusive religious community. And that is indeed good news. Amen.

² https://www.thetrevorproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Trevor-Project-Accepting-Adult-Research-Brief_June-2019.pdf