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“*Talitha Cum*”¹

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Text: Mark 5: 21-43

On Friday evening I stopped in at the church to check my messages quickly before going home for supper. One message stopped me dead.

It was an email from a woman I knew in Nova Scotia, who likes to send out those cutsey-poo, saccharine messages about guardian angels helping people find parking spots at crowded shopping malls, or pictures of babies with hands clasped in prayer, stories or pictures too syrupy even for *Chicken Soup for the Soul* but not, apparently, for friends. If you have email, you know what I’m talking about.

I decided to open it anyway. Something in the subject line grabbed me. And what I found was no sweet message or sugary story, but a horrific picture. A picture I’d seen before and had posted on my weblog with a bit of commentary. Others have seen it, too.

In the picture, a little famine-stricken child – a child younger than Naomi, our two-year-old – was crawling towards a United Nations food camp located a kilometre away. Meanwhile, a vulture stood patiently in the background, waiting for the child to die so it can eat her.

I was going to pass out a copy of the picture to you folks, but I thought it might be too disturbing for some, and maybe even a little obscene. It’s a terrible picture that speaks a terrible truth: children still die horrible, preventable deaths in a world of abundance.

It seems that ever since I became a dad, almost five years ago, I’ve become more sensitive to children’s sufferings. They say that when you become a parent you become a parent to all children everywhere. I think that’s true. Whenever my daughters get fevers, I worry. When I saw that picture, I almost threw up.

So I think I know why Jesus was like a man on a mission when he heard a little girl from the local synagogue was sick and dying at home. And why he dropped everything and ran to find her.

Along the way, a woman who'd been bleeding for twelve years – twelve years! – grabbed his cloak, hoping, believing, praying that she could be healed without any attention being drawn to her. After all, if anyone knew her condition she could get into a lot of trouble. She wasn't even supposed to be out in public, let alone touch anyone. The Scriptures were crystal clear: Women with her condition were "unclean." Those she touched were then also "unclean." And if she were caught making others unclean, there would be consequences. Terrible consequences. The book of Leviticus was unambiguous.

Despite what the Scripture said, she reached through the crowd and touched his cloak. Good news! She's healed! Bad news: Jesus stopped cold. She knew that he knew that she had touched him. Now she was in big, *big* trouble.

"WHO TOUCHED ME?!" Jesus roars.

Silence. All eyes descend on this newly healed, terrified woman cowering at Jesus' feet.

She hoped her death would be quick and painless. But they would probably bury her to the waist, and then throw rocks at her until she was dead. Her fear gripped her so hard she could barely breathe. Here was a great teacher who knew the Scriptures inside and out, so he knew that she broke God's law.

But instead, he looked in her eyes, and with gentle love and calm compassion said, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

He knew who she was and what she had done. So did everyone else. Some grumbled about how he completely disregarded clear scriptural teaching. "How dare he heal this woman! She deserves death!" But others saw that his compassion and love were really what the Scriptures' teaching was all about. Still others saw that in her willingness to claim God's love for herself, she taught them all a bigger vision of God's justice and how God wants to gather all people together, no matter who they are or what they've done. There were two teachers, that day.

Meanwhile, back at the house, the news was not good. Every parent's worst nightmare came true. The child was dead.

"Thank you, Jesus, but your services are no longer required."

"She's not dead," says Jesus, "she's just sleeping." (Some preachers just don't know when to shut up, do they?)

"At least let me see the girl," Jesus says.

Taking with him her parents and his inner circle of disciples, Jesus took her hand and said, “*Talitha cum,*” “Little girl, get up.”

Her eyes opened, and she got up out of bed.

The Bible says that people were amazed by Jesus’ ability to heal and to raise the dead. To their eyes, these were deeds of tremendous power.

Yet to God’s eyes, these were acts of love, not all that different from the dad asking Jesus’ help or the woman grabbing at Jesus’ cloak. Jesus talked about faith being the great healer. But I wonder if faith is less about strong belief and more an act of desperation. The dad hunted the city looking for Jesus, and the woman fought her way through the crowd, because there was nothing else they could do. Their faith was the result of being at the end of their ropes, of wanting something – anything – to happen. Jesus saw their hurt, and he responded with love.

Jesus asks us to do the same thing. That’s why we are going to Mexico, to open our eyes, to see hurt, to love people for who they are and the stories they tell and not just as objects - the “poor” - whom we can help. We want to see the world more broadly, to see how others live, to be more sensitive to people’s suffering and to experience their joys with them along the way. To reflect upon how Jesus asks us to respond to hurting people. To say with Jesus to all who suffer, “*Talitha cum,* get up and walk.”

The photographer who took the picture of the starving child walked away; he received his Pulitzer Prize, only to commit suicide a few months later, collapsing under the weight of his guilt. Instead of us walking away, Jesus is asking us to walk *toward* those who suffer, so that we can be his healing agents in a fractured, hurting, and sin-sick world, and maybe in return be healed ourselves. Healed of diseases that we may not even know we have: diseases of indifference, diseases of prejudice, disease of “affluenza” as one writer puts it, the disease of wanting stuff more than loving people. Maybe we’ll find we can teach folks something, but my guess is we’ll realize that there’s much we need to be taught ourselves.

We’re going south to see and to observe, to listen and to discover, to ask questions, to experience a life quite different from our own, and – maybe – be transformed. And we will come back possibly with more question, and more aware of people’s struggles in our own families and communities.

So I ask you, people of Good Shepherd, to pray for us, that God will open our hearts, will soften us towards people's struggles, to act contrary to indifference. I ask you to ask God to bless the people we encounter, and to help us explore and live God's justice as we build new relationships.

May this be so among us. Amen.

Notes

- ¹ This sermon was preached 2 July 2006 at a commissioning service for a group of young adults from the congregation who were travelling to Mexico on a study tour.