

Proper 8, Year B

Eliza Linley

2 Sam 1:1, 17-27, Ps 130, 2 Cor. 8:7-15, Mk. 5:21-43

The gospel story of the healing of two women speaks to me about something that is going on in the church right now, and it has to do with the MeToo movement. This coming week in Austin delegates will gather for the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, an event that happens every three years. In the beginning of May the House of Bishops sent out a letter to the whole church acknowledging the church's guilt and sinful behavior over time for the harassment and sexual abuse of women. The bishops asked for letters from victims of abuse to be read at a service of healing during convention as a starting point for healing in the church, and to end the collusion of silence.

Many years ago in another place I was asked to provide pastoral care to a woman who was the victim of clergy sexual abuse. When she sued the priest, the bishop and the diocese, she was given funding for a couple of years of therapy for the price of her silence. Not long after, a clergy colleague told me that, when she was a candidate for Holy Orders, she had also suffered a similar fate at the hands of the same priest, but because she was a candidate for ordination, she said nothing to anyone until many years later. Both women felt shamed and humiliated. I, too, have been silent for over twenty years, preserving the confidence of the woman I counselled. But when this request came, I wrote a letter preserving the anonymity of both, and sent a copy to my friend, the priest who now serves in another part of the country. This week I received a letter back from the House of Bishops asking to read my letter at the liturgy of healing in Austin. So I called my friend, the priest, for her permission, which she gave. BUT, she said, why is it that the victims are being asked to speak up? What about the perpetrators? I want to hear an apology from the person who did this!

I think back to a time when I travelled to South Africa to learn about the struggle for racial justice, and about the history of the Truth and Reconciliation movement. It wasn't initiated by perpetrators, of course. Agents of the apartheid government didn't wake up one morning and decide that they

wanted to come clean. It was started by those working on behalf of the victims who had the courage to speak their truth.

What do we do when the institutions and structures we have counted on seem to be the agents of oppression and harm? Jesus himself was the target of persecution from the religious structures of his time. He ate and drank with sinners, he healed on the Sabbath, etc., etc. Even his death on the cross was a casualty of the confluence of religion, government and sin. And yet he was willing to go outside the structures of his time to help and to heal, to transform victimhood into new life.

The account in Mark's gospel of the healing of two women is a case in point. The healing of the woman with a hemorrhage is sandwiched in between the beginning and end of the story of Jairus' daughter. And the two have several things in common. Both stories are about women, one who is twelve years old, one who has been suffering for twelve years. The woman who touches Jesus' garment is afraid. Jesus tells the parents of the girl who is at the point of death not to be afraid. Both the parents and the woman believe that Jesus' powerful touch will heal. The woman even believes that if she so much as touches his cloak she will be healed. Jairus, a prominent leader of the Jewish synagogue, believed that Jesus could bring his daughter back, even from the edge of death. But these two have something else in common as well.

Both of them are ritually unclean, and untouchable. Everyone believed the girl to be dead, and Jewish purity laws forbid any but those appointed to touch a dead body. You remember the story of the Good Samaritan – that's why the priest and the Levite passed by on the other side of the road, because they thought the man by the road was dead.

And the woman the woman with a flow of blood was not only unclean, but would contaminate anyone she touched. This was probably one reason she did not reach out to touch Jesus but only his garment, and also why she was so frightened. She might have been in really big trouble, had anyone

but Jesus found out what she was doing. What Jesus does, in his willingness to touch either one of these women, is scandalous. The crowd laughs at him when he goes into Jairus' house. "So, think you can raise the DEAD, Mr. bigtime healer?" This is where Jesus, just as in a parable, turns the story upside down.

Instead of the girl, presumably dead, and the suffering woman making HIM unclean, he heals them both, making them whole. In Greek, by the way, to be healed is the same word as to be saved. And so Jesus gives his hearers a new way of seeing uncleanness and restoration to wholeness. "She is not dead; she is sleeping." But that's not all. He also says that it's NOT his powerful or miraculous touch that has produced these healings, but the ordinary, and yet miraculous, faith of Jairus, and of the woman who touched his coat. So by this equation it is not faith in Jesus as a miracle worker that is necessary for new life. It is rather faith in a God that wills wholeness and healing for all creation, all the time. And so he gives us a new way of seeing death and life.

Jesus' healings are scandalous. He touches the untouchable. And this is how the stories meet us where we live. One of the worst things about the abuse we humans practice on one another is that it shames the victim. Whether it's the abuse of women, or children, or refugees, or poor people, or anyone on the receiving end of the abuse of power, shame and humiliation are hallmarks of the way victims are made to feel. Because the things we're ashamed of make us untouchable to ourselves. We become that crowd that's ready to laugh Jesus out of town when he comes to heal the sick, the dying, the dead. Of course, he's coming for us, to heal those parts of ourselves that are unclean, untouchable, unlovable. No one is unlovable to God. And yet it is frightening for our most shameful secrets to be known in such an intimate way, even by the one who knows us better than we know ourselves.

Can we learn to recognize grace when it happens, sometimes in front of our faces? Can we be party to the scandal that may shock the decent, but release the power of resurrection? It is Jesus' hallmark

to turn the usual story upside down, and to risk ridicule and rejection in order to restore us, the broken, to wholeness. And if we are skeptical he has an even more outrageous scandal to offer us: the cross and the empty tomb. His grace sets us free, but its price for him is the cross, perhaps the biggest risk of all.

We who are on the receiving end of spiritual healing know one further scandalous demonstration of grace: Christ makes each recipient of reconciliation also a minister of reconciliation. His audacious expectation is that those who have been forgiven will forgive; that those who know new life will offer new life to others. That's audacious because in this world, grace appears as scandal, mercy appears unjust and leaves us uncomfortable. Maybe the church isn't going about repentance for the abuse of women in exactly the right way. On the other hand, the church is no longer silent. May this beginning also open the door to healing of others whose experience has made them hurt, fearful, cynical.

Being a minister of God's grace may mean being willing to weather the scandal. It may mean going around the structures that prop up old ways of hanging on to power. It may mean appearing to others as impure by society's standards, or spending time with those who do not appear "worthwhile". It may mean telling someone who believes himself, herself unlovable that they are not beyond God's ability to forgive. It may mean making room for undeserved mercies for ourselves and for others, understanding that all are sinners and all are redeemed.

May we be able to see the opportunity when it is placed before us. May we see past scandal, and welcome grace.