

Sermon on Mark 5: 21-43 & 7: 24-30

The Jesus Movement

In my sermon two weeks ago, I pointed out that in these current weeks and months it is more important than ever to follow Jesus.

We are living in crazy times, not only here in Germany, but all over Europe, and also in the USA. We observe a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership wherever we look.

It is more important than ever to put following Jesus before anything else! Nationality, political party, race, gender, geography... nothing is more important than belonging to Jesus and following in his footsteps.

“Jesus did not establish an institution, though institutions can serve his cause. He did not organize a political party, though his teachings have profound impact on politics. Jesus did not even found a religion. No, Jesus began a movement, fuelled by his spirit, a movement whose purpose was, and is, to change the face of the earth from the nightmare it often is, into the dream that God intends,” writes Michael B. Curry, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the USA, who preached that awesome sermon at the wedding of Prince Harry and Megan just a few weeks ago.

In his intension to fill people with energy to go out and follow in the loving, liberating and life-giving way of Jesus Christ, he is preaching, writing and publishing real treasures for us Christians, who look for answers when we desperately ask, who Jesus is for us today. ...and what our loyalty to Christ requires from us at this strange moment of history...

Let us turn to the roots of our very life, to the deepest origins as Christians when we study the texts of the Gospel of Mark which the lectionary holds in store for us this summer.

The early Christians, for whom Mark wrote his gospel, were totally Christ-centered – completely focussed on Jesus and his way. In fact, if you look at the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament, long before Christianity was ever called the church, or even Christianity, it was called “the way”. The way of Jesus was “the way”.

The spirit of Jesus, the spirit of God, infused people’s spirits and took over. The Jesus movement “centered on Jesus, eliminated poverty and hunger and integrated people at all levels of society,” writes New Testament scholar Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza in her book “Bread not Stone”.

When the spirit that lived so fully in Jesus inhabits us, then we have a chance to live like him. That is precisely what happened to the early followers of his way.

They shared.

They learned how to become more than a bunch of individual, self-interested people. They found themselves becoming a counter-cultural community where all had equal standing.

And this is where today's gospel texts enter the stage... (Mark 5: 21-43 & 7:24-30)

There is this story of a young woman who has died and an older woman with bleeding that couldn't be stopped for 12 long years.

Mark even takes time to share with us this woman's suffering. Mark, who usually has the telegram-style of telling his stories, shows compassion and takes time for two women's stories. Countercultural!

Even more so when we learn that in the first century cultural context, women were considered less clean than men. Women were regarded as a constant threat to men; men feared to be polluted, made unclean and dirty when being in contact with a woman.

In addition to being female each of the women in our passage has a second source of being unclean. The girl has become a dead body and the older woman has this unstoppable bleeding. Any physical contact with these women would make anybody unclean. Jesus is no exception.

But instead of safe-guarding his own and individual purity, Jesus makes both women pure, and restores them to society. It's not only a woman and a girl whose lives are being changed and turned upside down. It is the whole community which experiences healing and change.

The Jesus of the Gospel of Mark creates a new understanding of community, - a community which is whole, inclusive and without boundaries.

The woman with the bleeding is violating all standards of ancient female behaviour: she is neither submissive nor does she hold back. She initiates contact with Jesus. She sneaks up in the crowd and touches Jesus' clothes. If she only touches, she thinks, she could be healed...

So, different to other stories of healing, this woman is not offered healing by Jesus. She claims it, takes it... without permission from anybody. Caught in doing so, she is not blamed but praised. "Daughter," says Jesus, "your faith has made you well." And he includes her into God's big family.

Her risky, forbidden, secret and bold action is called faith.

The two intertwined stories are united by the use of the number 12. The girl was 12 years old, and the woman had suffered for 12 years. 12 – a symbol for

“the whole of Israel”, for all people, all believers... The inclusion of women, even unclean women, is not just an issue of one village or one community; it applies to all... and forever.

Another counter-cultural aspect of course comes in the person of Jairus. The mighty man in church and community, the boss of the synagogue seeks help from a wandering preacher and miracle-worker... He throws himself at Jesus’ feet and begs him to help. What a revolution of hierarchy and tradition! What a change of mind, and what a challenge to old rules and standards. The rich and powerful seek blessing from the nobodies who have nothing... - and they receive it!

What consequences may all this have had for the village and its inhabitants in which the girl, her father, her family, and the woman lived? How might their lives and relationships have changed?

Another story Mark uses to set the world upside down with the Jesus movement is that of the Syrophenician woman, a Gentile, a stranger, a non-believer who seeks out Jesus to help her suffering child.

Mark again emphasizes the significance of wholeness rather than purity, and of breaking boundaries rather than sticking to narrow and nationalistic concepts.

That’s the message!

If we dare to look closer, we discover a most remarkable dialogue between this foreign woman and Jesus.

She pleads. He refuses. Snappy sayings. A sharp tone. In the end: a smart and clever woman and a wise and open-minded man...

Jesus first does not want to heal the daughter of the Syrophenician woman. He argues that the children (the Jews) must be fed before the dogs (the Gentiles). ...makes our jaws drop, doesn’t it?

But not so with the woman.

She cleverly and politely uses Jesus’ own argument to convince him: “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”

Jesus replies that “for saying that” the demon is gone from her daughter. For the content of what she says, and not just for her faith or persistence – as in Matthew’s version – Jesus grants her request.

This foreign woman has led Jesus to enlarge the boundaries of the realm of God to include the whole world.

What an amazing offer of a God “who so loved the (whole) world...

Nobody has the right to place one nation over others... not then and not now.

Jesus learned that, because a fearless and bold woman taught him so. Counter-cultural...

The Gospel of Mark proclaims good news: the breaking in of God's kingdom, bringing abundant blessings for this age, blessings that include healings and feedings, and the new community gathered around Jesus. The Jesus of the Gospel of Mark calls disciples to join this new community, to engage in his way of service to those with less power and status than themselves.

And nobody understood the power of Jesus' way of love better than the disciples whose lives he turned upside down. As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting out a net into the sea. And Jesus said to them: "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Jesus first followers were simple fishermen. He himself a carpenter. I think, Mark is trying to tell us something about equality and not putting the rich over the poor, the mighty over the ordinary.

And yet, there came points when the disciples were forgetting this and negotiating for good jobs in the kingdom.

Later at the last supper and on Good Friday they fail Jesus altogether.

But thank God, Mark had the great idea to let Jesus break with the custom and tradition of his day and call woman disciples.

The women were there at the cross.

If it hadn't been for Mary Magdalene and the women disciples, we might not know to this day, that Jesus rose from the dead.

When the going got tough, it was the women who remained...

Keep that in mind, when we reflect the rest of the story of this counter-cultural community where all had equal standing.

This bunch of people kept following Jesus long after it seemed he was gone. And the Book of Acts tells the story of how the spirit of Jesus took hold of them, and "the way of Jesus" became their way.

This same group of timid, fragile, sinful, mortal and ever so fallible human beings were later the leaders who were turning the world upside down.

Cowards found courage.

The confused found clarity.

By shaping their lives around Jesus, even in spite of their failures, these people changed the world for the better.

And the truth is that we are here as followers of Jesus in the 21st century because of what they did in the 1st century.

They did it by following the self-sacrificing, other-directed way of Jesus. They reoriented their lives totally around Jesus and his teachings.

That's how they became a movement. The first wave of Jesus movement. A movement built on the unconditional love of God for the world and the mandate to live that love!

It is there for us, this movement and this love, when we need it most, when it seems the way of selfishness and hate wins over in the world.

We are living in crazy times.

And we need to follow Jesus before anything else.

And we need to go and tell people...

...of God's dream for us and the world.

“I have a dream,” God says. “Please, help me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its wars and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, where there will be more laughter, joy and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing,” writes Desmond Tutu in his book “God has a dream”.

In the world God intends for us, swords will be turned into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks, and all will know that they are God's children, members of one family, the family of God!

And in God's family there are no outsiders; all are insiders: black and white, rich and poor, male and female – all belong and have an equal share.

Amen.