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The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – June 27, 2021
Mark 5:21-43

Coming of age in the 80's, it should be no surprise to hear that I love the Irish rock band U2. Their 1987 album Joshua Tree was the one that most defined my later high school years. I still remember the first time I heard the soaring staccato guitar riffs that defined the landscape for the song, "Where the Streets Have No Name". The sound was so different and combined driving tension with soaring melodies in a way that you couldn't help but listen. The song was based on a story Bono, the lead singer, had heard about Belfast, Northern Ireland, where a person's religion and income were known simply by the street on which they lived. One was bound by these labels and trapped in these divisions. The song speaks of the longing and hope for a world that transcends such divisions, barriers, and labels – a place where the streets have no name.

But the U2 album that came to mind as I reflected on our Gospel lesson, was their earlier album War from 1983. Sitting with Mark's stories of Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman – each coming to Jesus from a place of intense and prolonged suffering, desperate for healing – I found myself hearing the refrain from the first song on the album called Sunday Bloody Sunday: "How long, how long must we sing this song? How long? How long?"

The song sets the tone by opening with a militaristic sharp drum rhythm. Bono sings the pain of his lament of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, focusing on the 1972 Bloody Sunday incident where British troops shot and killed unarmed civil rights protesters. As the band has performed the song over the decades, the focus of the lament has expanded. There is a timelessness to this song that crosses all human cultures, and it echoes the eternal psalmist cry of lament to God. It speaks to the suffering of communities of people facing injustice and horror and to the individual human cry in a broken world.

But what makes this album so poignant is that the last song on it addresses the cry of lament from the first. This song, 40, is called that because is an arrangement of the essence of Psalm 40. The story of the song's origin is that the band had just finished recording the album War but they felt it was missing something – that it was just one song short. They were still in the recording studio but only had about an hour of time left. So, they decided to revive the music from a previously abandoned song that they hadn't been able to make work. In search of lyrical inspiration, Bono picked up the Bible and started flipping through it and landed on Psalm 40, on which he based his words.

The song seems to directly respond to the lament from Sunday Bloody Sunday of "how long must we sing this song", with these words of promise of divine salvation, singing: "I waited patiently for the Lord; He inclined and heard my cry. He lift me up out of the pits; Out of the miry clay. I will sing, sing a new song. I will sing, sing a new song." At the end of this album, we hear the transformation of the sorrowful song of lament into the new song of hope. These are ancient and eternal words that are cried out from the depths of our collective hearts. They speak to a shared human condition of brokenness and suffering, even while holding desperately to the divine promise of salvation, healing, and restoration to wholeness.

Something like this is what is happening in our Gospel lesson. Today, Mark gives us two stories of healing – one story nested within the other. Biblical scholars often call this a "Marcan sandwich." We begin with Jesus back on land and back at his ministry of healing, and he surrounded on all sides with folks who are hopeful that he can help them. In the midst of this crowd, Jairus pushes his way through and falls at Jesus' feet, begging him to come to his home and heal his dying daughter. As a

synagogue leader, he would have been a powerful enough figure to summon whomever to come to him, but on this day, he was fearful and desperate enough to seek Jesus out himself.

In compassion, Jesus agrees to go with Jairus. But along the way, he is interrupted. A woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years is also desperate enough to thread her way through the crowd to Jesus. Because of her bleeding, this unnamed woman would have been considered ritually unclean – making her a social outcast – for anyone who came in contact with her would also be unclean. In her condition, she would have been relegated to the fringes of society, segregated from her family and community. She took a big risk by defying the rules and entering into the crowd.

But she does so because she sees Jesus as her only salvation. Thinking, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well,” the woman reaches out as Jesus passes by. Even this merest touch heals her instantly and she is restored to wholeness. Jesus, aware that healing power had been drawn from him, he asks who had touched him. The woman “in fear and trembling” came forward and fell down before him and confessed. In love, Jesus calls her “daughter” and says that her faith has made her well.

Mark then picks up again the storyline of Jairus and his daughter. In Jesus’ presence, Jairus is informed that his daughter had just died and that Jesus might as well resume his previous plans. Instead, Jesus tells Jairus, “Do not fear, only believe,” and they continue on. Upon entering the house, Jesus approaches the girl, takes her by the hand, and speaks to her, “Little girl, get up!” Immediately, the once-dead girl rises and walks around.

For Mark, the theological significance of these stories is how they demonstrate and affirm Jesus as messiah and the true king of Israel.

What seem to be magical miracles are, in actuality, deeds of power demonstrating that the spirit and authority of God moves within him. For Mark, Jesus is, indeed, the Lord of creation and his kingship embodies reconciliation and healing – a restoration to wholeness. And these stories make plain that it is faith that is the conduit facilitating this healing.

In the very next scene in Mark’s gospel, Jesus returns to Nazareth and goes to the synagogue to teach. But the people think they know who Jesus is and are skeptical of him. Because of their lack of faith, Jesus could not heal most of them and he “was amazed at their unbelief.”

These two nested stories show us that faith is necessary for our healing. They are stories that demonstrate God’s power working through Jesus – that God’s healing and salvation is always present and what is required is not status, money, ritual purity, or specific acts, but faith. Faith alone has the strength to overcome the bondage of sin, fear, and suffering. Faith is the conduit for our spiritual salvation and healing. And when we are healed on the inside – when we live in the grace of the kingdom of God – when we live in Christ – we “go in peace”, irrespective of our circumstances. That is where true salvation may be found.

The problem, of course, is that even when we have the faith that could move mountains, we are not always healed....at least not in ways we expect. As the saying goes, God always responds to our prayers, but just not always in the ways we want. But when we faithfully open ourselves to Christ’s healing grace – if only out of pure desperation – we open ourselves to the transformation of our hearts and the healing of our souls. Faith is what turns the impotent veneer of optimism, which denies the difficulties and limitations of reality, into a robust and empowering hope. This hope recognizes that, as long as we live east of Eden, we live in a fragile and broken world, but even there God does not leave us orphaned and pours out his abundance grace upon us.

When we reach out in faith – when we abandon our fears and wade into the crowds, if only to touch the hem of Jesus’ cloak – we are restored to wholeness and reconciled to unity with each other. It is there that our cries of lament are heard, and our pain is healed. There, we find our song of lament has transformed into a new song of hope.

Amen.