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Faith

Our Gospel story for today is one in which we see the definition of faith not as believing in the impossible, which is how it is often defined, but in how we trust in God so much, that we are willing to cross boundaries and leave the status quo that we are living, and enter the Rule of God.

In the Gospel story for today, Jesus has just come back from the Gentile area on the other side of the sea, where he has cured a man called Legion, of possession by evil spirits (they represent the Roman army). He is there with the people when a man named Jairus comes into the picture. Jairus is called a leader of the synagogue. That does not mean that he is a rabbi. It just means that he is perhaps the equivalent of a Deacon or someone on the church board. Jairus shows the proper respect to Jesus. He basically has good manners in his society. He comes, falls at Jesus' feet, and begs him repeatedly to come and heal Jairus's daughter who is dying. This is a very difficult invitation to refuse. So, Jesus comes with Jairus to heal his daughter. Who could refuse such an invitation?

What we see here is the workings of an honor and shame culture. This kind of culture, according to Anthropologist, is a more traditional kind of culture in which people tend to be controlled by what other people think of them. Also, resources tend to be scarce in traditional honor societies, which is to be expected. Honor is standing in the social group, and people are most concerned about their standing in their own family and village. It is social in nature, and, according to one author I read, works like our credit rating. We cannot do things - like buy a house - without a good credit rating, and people could not do certain things back then without enough honor. Our society tends to control people more by using guilt, which is more individual in nature than shame, which is more social. Our society tries to control us more by our conscience and by the law. Traditional societies use social reputation more. All societies use both to some degree.

So Jairus has fallen at the feet of Jesus and begged him to come and heal his dying daughter. Jairus has obeyed the rules of his honor and shame society. However, while they are on the way to the home of Jairus, they run into someone who breaks the rules. She has no standing, no honor. According to the story, she has been suffering from a hemorrhage for 12 years. This would have made her ritually impure, according to the Torah. According to Jewish scholars, this might not have really been much of an issue because they are not near the Temple, so it would not have affected sacrifices. This is not how the story has often been interpreted. What is certainly an issue is that she has spent all that she has on medical care that is ineffective, and it has cost her all of her money. Now she has nothing. This was a common problem in the ancient world. This is very similar to people today, going into unsurmountable debt due to medical bills. Back then, people did not have health insurance and there was no good medical science like

there is today. That really did not start to evolve until we got into the 19th and 20th centuries. All this woman would be able to find would be medical quackery. This woman has been exploited.

She has been exploited and unlike the daughter of Jairus, she has no father or any other man to come and speak up for her, which would have been expected at that time. So, what does she do? She does not come up to Jesus in a straight forward manner like Jairus did, because she does not think that she can. She sneaks up to Jesus and touches his cloak from behind, in a clandestine manner. She is trying to fly under the radar. She has bad manners because she does not feel that she has a choice.

When the woman touches Jesus, she can feel that she has been healed. Jesus feels that power has gone out of him, and he wants to know who touched his clothes. The disciples, as usual, do not understand. The woman is finally forced to do after she has received what she needed, what Jairus felt safe to do before -hand. She now falls at her knees, like Jairus, and explains the whole thing to Jesus. Now that Jesus knows what has happened, he gives her the honor that she lacked. He accepts her as his daughter and blesses her. He does for her what Jairus was able to do for his daughter, but no one would do for this woman. What could possibly be more beautiful?

We do not live in an honor and shame society, but we live in a society where what matters and opens doors for people is not honor, but wealth. The end result is just as bad. People without money have been treated every bit as badly as the people in the ancient world who had no honor were. For all of our centuries of “Christian Civilization”, we behave no differently. Our society’s priorities are un-Christian.

Let us go back to Jairus for a moment. He is a leader of the synagogue. He was in a position, and had a responsibility to help this woman, and yet there is no indication that they knew each other. Jairus, as a good and faithful Jew, had a responsibility to help her, and apparently he has not. This brings up the uncomfortable topic of just how many responsibilities Christians are shirking, in our own day and age. We are living in an era when church attendance is in decline. Yet we live in a hurting society and a hurting world. Our world has many problems, and we have been hearing from the younger generation, quite rightly, that they have already had enough. They are not willing to accept climate change, police brutality, racism, homophobia, gun violence, or many of our other problems in today’s society. While these issues are often framed as partisan politics, I think these are better understood as genuinely humanitarian concerns. If the church were to rise to the occasion and accept our responsibility to take on these humanitarian issues, I believe that churches would once again be attractive to our young people, and the pews in America could be filled.

Our friend Jairus seems to have some biases that stand in the way of his helping this woman and many like her. That is not his fault. Biases are part of the human condition. We have only a limited capacity as humans, and we all have limited experiences and points of view. We are not at fault for having biases, but we are responsible for addressing

them and growing when it is made apparent to us that our point of view needs to expand. We can all be naïve. Racial and other biases are a big problem for us today. Even people who are not hateful ideological bigots can still have biases that stand in our way of acting like the brothers and sisters that our loving God calls us all to be.

Jesus proceeds to the home of Jairus. Jairus' daughter has died. Even though she has died Jesus is able to raise her back from the dead. It appears at first that Jesus stopping to help the woman with the bleeding has cost the life of Jairus' daughter. Fortunately, it has not. We often tend to think that what helps one person will do harm to the other. We think that if we help immigrants, then it has to hurt the working class. We think that if we help Black people, we have to hurt White people. That is not true, but it is very common for people to think that way. This kind of thinking is what created racism in the first place.

According to historians, racism started in colonial times, when the wealthy ruling class noticed that enslaved Africans, Native Americans, and white indentured servants were starting to band together and have solidarity for joint resistance and mutual aid. When the ruling class saw this, they started to tell the indentured servants that they could be superior and be treated better if they identified with the white ruling class, instead of those whose socio-economic station was closer to their own. That is how the zero-sum game of racism - where one group has to lose in order for another group to win - was born.

This also points out another problem in our society: We do not know the difference between what we want and what we need. I might want a Porsche, but that does not mean that I need it. I might want to be a billionaire, but that does not mean that I need to be one. We are consumers instead of neighbors. We care about what we want, instead of being satisfied with what we need. Jairus might not get what he may want (being first), but he does get what he needs - the life of his daughter.

Jesus shows a different way, one where there does not have to be division, but there can be genuine unity. Jesus, as God's Messiah, was about the Rule of God on this Earth. What the world would be like if God was actually, objectively, and obviously in charge. There would be no war, poverty, prejudice, or destruction of the environment. We would be living together as God intended. That was his mission. That is our mission as the church today.

That is our mission, but the church cannot fulfill it without faith on our part. Faith and works must go hand in hand for us to make progress. In James 2.17 it says, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." If our so-called faith has no works, then it lacks love and is not genuine. As Martin Luther King said,

"Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and women, and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry as dust religion."

However, we also need to remember that righteous works without faith - that do not engage in spiritual practice - and do not ultimately trust in God, will not stand the test of time. It will be like the house that was built upon the sand, and it will collapse or degenerate when difficulties inevitably arise. The saying really is true "Without you, God won't. Without God, you can't." Faith and works must go together, in order to accomplish anything.

In our story for today, we saw two examples of faith: Jairus and the woman with the hemorrhage. Neither was at fault for their circumstances, but both took action based on faith. Jesus responded to their faith by ignoring the boundaries that were part of the status quo. God is on the side of the kind of change that our world needs. However, it remains to be seen whether the church is willing to have enough faith, in order to act as a servant to a hurting humanity, or whether it will wither and die out. It really is up to us, but it can be done. Because, as it also says in the Gospels, "With God all things are possible."