

Mark 5: 21-43
Creekside COB
July 8, 2006

The Walking Wounded

At the Church of the Brethren Annual Conference, I take in the action from the mezzanine seats. Perched above the delegate body, I can see who is waiting their turn to speak at the microphones. I can keep tabs on our delegate's voting record. I can talk with friends I haven't seen since the last conference. If I cannot find someone in the crowds on floor level, I can spot them from above.

Last week in Des Moines, I spotted some people I see every year, but hadn't noticed before-- at least not like I did this time. Maybe its because their number now includes people I know— former church leaders, professors, pastors, and spouses. They were in wheel chairs and motorized carts and had to use walkers. They cannot get around without assistance, due to advancing age, or injury, or other chronic conditions. They belong to a group we call, “the disabled.”

They sat behind the delegate section—a group unto themselves, but they were no different than anyone else in the arena. All shared a common Brethren heritage, and all were disabled. Every person was wounded by life. The only difference was that their wounds were visible, while the rest were concealed.

People outside the church looking in get the impression that church folks are better off. We seem happy. We seem to get along. We appear well adjusted and *all together*. We do not seem to be afflicted with trials and troubles to the same degree as others. This is the image Christians want to project, and why not? Everyone in Jesus is a new creation. We are not under the condemnation of the law, for in Christ there is no condemnation. For freedom Christ has set us free. We have something to cheer about.

Take a closer look, however, and you will discover that neither the outsiders nor insiders are *all together*. In fact, there are a higher percentage of personal disorders in the church than in society in general. We shouldn't be surprised. The church is not for the healthy people.

When Jesus was asked why he sat down to supper with sinners he said, *"Those who are well don't need a doctor, only those who are sick; I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners,"* (Mk. 3: 17). Hospitals are not bothered by the presence of sick people. Hospitals exist to care for the sick. The church should not be bothered by the presence of far-from-perfect people. The church exists for broken, wounded people who know they cannot manage themselves by themselves, and who seek the healing grace of God.

In some churches you do not ask questions. You do not voice uncertainty or honest doubt. The disciple Thomas wasn't present for Jesus' first appearance to the others after the resurrection. You recall that he didn't believe a word of it. The only way he would swallow the story without choking was to see Jesus himself and poke a finger in his wounds. Thomas doubted, but he wasn't kicked out for it. Jesus didn't condemn him. There was a place for him, just as there is a safe place for us to question and wait for God's revelation.

On our church sign we should display words from the hymn, *Here In This Place*-- "Gather us in the lost and forsaken, gather us in the blind and the lame..." Today's gospel story begs questions. Why is there sickness and suffering? Why are some healed and others are not? Do we ask that our wounds be healed, or do we ask for the grace to bear them for Jesus?

Our lesson weaves two healing stories together. The people involved couldn't be more different. Mark introduces us to Jairus, a synagogue ruler, and a woman with no name. Jairus was prominent; she was unknown. He was a person of privilege; she was dirt poor. Yet both believed Jesus could help them. Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter was near death. The woman had been hemorrhaging for twelve years, and spent her last

dime on doctors who couldn't help her. "Come, lay your hands on my daughter and she'll be well..." Jairus said (5: 23). "If I can just get close enough to touch his cloak, I'll be well," the woman said (5: 28).

They believed, but not everyone did. The woman touched the hem of Jesus' clothes and was healed. Jesus experienced a transfer of power and asked, "Who touched me?" The disciples were dismissive. "Who touched you? Who *didn't* touch you?" Then came word that Jairus' daughter was dead. "There's no point having Jesus come now," they said. But Jesus told Jairus, "Don't fear. Believe." Jesus arrived and said the girl was not dead but asleep. The people laughed and were soon amazed to see her up and ready to eat.

Not everyone believed, but it didn't change the outcome. Steady, staunch, stubborn faith helped the healing happen. Jesus didn't point to himself. "Daughter, your faith that you would be well has made you well."

You know that we tread on thin ice when it comes to faith and healing. Cruel things are said to hurting people in the name of faith. "If you would just have more faith, God will heal you." It's another way of saying, "It's your fault. God won't honor your prayer because you've got low inventory in the faith department." If it were only that simple. I've known people with more faith than I could ever conceive who have prayed for healing that didn't happen.

The further I go, the less I know. Thirty years ago I thought I'd have it all figured out by now. When it comes to vexing questions about why things happen as they do, and why God permits evil to prosper and allows the innocent to suffer, and why it seems that one bad thing after another happens to some people, and why dear Christians with so much to give to life are stricken in their prime, I find myself giving a repetitive answer... "I don't know."

In her book, *Stumbling Toward Faith*, Renee Alston observes:

“In my journey toward God, one of the greatest things I have learned is that there is much I do not know. Sometimes that really ticks me off. Why is it that I don’t know what’s going on here? Why isn’t there some kind of answer for me? What kind of God lives in these “I don’t know”s? What kind of God keeps these secrets?

If there is anything I’ve learned about not knowing, it’s that it reveals the depth of my trust. Can I trust a God who will not explain himself? Can I trust a God who leaves me not knowing his purpose, his will? Can I trust something beyond the pat answers, the snatched promises, the ways we quiet ourselves when the questioning grows too strong?”

To admit “not knowing” life’s mysteries and God’s ways is not an admission of ignorance or of giving up and giving in. It can be a profound expression of trust. When we trust in God’s presence and power and believe that finally, the outcomes will all be His, we can relinquish the need to figure everything out and be biblical and spiritual know-it-alls. Remember the definition of faith in Hebrews 11—“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen.”

There is a reason the church has many hurting people. It’s because we seek relief and release from the wounded parts of our lives, or, failing that, we know we are given the spiritual strength to prevail from Christ and each other. The woman who touched Jesus didn’t have a name, but Jesus gave her one... daughter. She and Jairus were different as night and day, but both belonged to the fellowship of brokenness; both trusted Jesus; he met both of their needs and they discovered they were brother and sister.

At Annual Conference I was waiting for a pastor friend to show up at a designated time. He arrived about an hour late with one of those, “Guess-what-happened-to-me?” looks on his face. “I

had an unexpected counseling session with a homeless guy in the men's room," he said. "The men's room?" I asked. "Yea-- the guy sat in the stall next to me and began telling me all his troubles. His life is a Greek tragedy."

As I thought about it, it seemed to be a parable of ministry. We can't take away the suffering of another without entering it. You cannot save a drowning person without putting *your* life at risk. Jesus healed by touching, being touched, and giving the life that was in him all the way to the cross. He has chosen to heal through us in tough places. It won't likely happen in a restroom stall, but in hospital rooms and while waiting in line at the funeral home to comfort the grieving. We can't help without being involved and running the risk of being wounded ourselves.

Sooner or later we will all get something. Sooner or later we all are in need of healing."