

“Jesus Madness”

Mark 5:21-43

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost; June 27, 2021

Nothing helps children learn faster than praise. Nothing helps children grow up better than praise. Praise, and the love that lies behind praise, is the most basic and organic mulch that produces a promising new person for this world. As infants and toddlers, we get praised for doing such amazing things like rolling over, sitting up, standing up, and walking. Way to go! Yay! Well, it *is* a big deal for an infant learning to stand on his or her own two feet and become a toddler. To encourage our young children in the ways of beauty, truth, and goodness, we praise them for not hitting back, for picking up their toys, for saying “please” and “thank you.” Words of praise and encouragement help to give a support structure for a considerate grown-up and a moral human being.

What child doesn’t love to revel in praise? “Mommy, Daddy, look what I did!” is the siren call of a child seeking praise and approval. We all crave affirmation for the good, the positive, the accomplishments we do: “I made my bed.” “I drew this picture.” “I loaded the dishwasher and turned it on!”

As children we all need to hear the words: “Good job,” “Well done,” “I’m so proud of you.” Praise and recognition for doing good is crucial for encouraging more good behavior and making “doing good” become an integral piece of our souls and psyches. We tell our children they are doing good, so they will do more good and be good as life goes on.

But sometime in life, earlier or later, we all eventually discover that “doing good” doesn’t always turn out all that good. Sometimes, often times, doing good things leads to bad things in your life. If you think back hard enough, you have a memory stored of the first time you did good, or did what you thought was good, and got punished for it. Maybe it was a parent who punished us for it. Maybe it was a teacher or a coach. But whoever punished us for doing good that first time, it was an awakening that changed your life and brought you out of childhood into adulthood.

You “stepped up” and got “stepped on.” That’s not unusual or unpredictable. That’s life. You stuck your neck out for someone and got your head chopped off. You climbed out on a limb to gather some fruit for someone and they mocked you. Limb, fruit, along with you, fell to the ground. No good deed goes unpunished.

Following Jesus will just as often get you into trouble as it might get you praise and approval. Jesus himself warned, “Woe betide you when everyone speaks well of you” (Luke 6:26). If it’s applause and praise you’re looking for, you might want to go another way, take another way rather than the Jesus way. Doing good, more often than not, gets you into trouble. But you still “do good.” No matter what the outcome, the mantra of Jesus’s followers is, “Do good always and in all ways, anyways.”

In today’s story from Mark’s Gospel, Jesus “does good” in two different ways. The faith, the hope, of the woman with internal bleeding is demonstrated by her bold move and unswerving faith. She’s so convinced that touching Jesus’s garment would heal her. And it does. She receives the gift of healing. So she kneels before Jesus and acknowledges that healing in a spirit of wonder and awe.

It’s hard for us to imagine how that miraculous healing dramatically changed the life of this one woman. Not only does she regain her physical health, but her healing removes her from the list of those who are “impure” and rejected by Jewish tradition from everyday interac-

tions within her community. The hemorrhaging of blood that kept this woman isolated from her family and faith community is finally stemmed by her own outpouring of faith in Jesus's power and healing abilities. In one moment of healing, she goes from being an "outsider" to an "insider."

Even greater is the miracle Jesus performs at the synagogue leader Jairus's home. Jairus is an insider, but his daughter is deathly ill. Her condition is so critical that Jesus drops everything he's doing and immediately heads to Jairus's home to "lay hands" upon the sick child. But even before the "rescue mission" can get underway, there comes bad news from those who always love to be bringers of the sad and the bad: "Your daughter's dead. Why bother the teacher anymore?"

But Jesus will not be deterred. He instead gathers his most trusted companions, Peter, James, John, along with the parents of the child, and continues on his mission. When he reaches Jairus's home and sees the traditional commotion of weeping and wailing, Jesus ignores it and sweeps all the paid mourners aside. Once within the home, he's ridiculed by the rest of the family for declaring, "The child isn't dead; she's asleep."

And so, at Jesus's touch, the child "awakes." Death is shaken off like a bad dream. Jesus doesn't make a big production out of this miraculous moment. He instead focuses on the most human element of this healing "and he told them to give her something to eat." Jesus and food always go together. Jesus raises a child from death and then orders-up some food for the belly. That's love.

So Jairus and his family, and presumably his entire synagogue, become a group of Jesus followers, his first congregation of faithful. And now you know the rest of the story....

Wait. No, I guess not. In all of the books of the New Testament, we never hear from Jairus or his family again. A desperate Jairus seeks out Jesus, confesses his faith in Jesus's healing abilities, and implores him to come and save his daughter. Jesus does exactly that. And what does Jairus offer in return? Undying loyalty? Unfailing love? Anything? Nope. Apparently Jairus went back into his safe, insider, synagogue life. He got what he wanted and needed, and that's it. We hear nothing of Jairus, his family, or that synagogue doing anything on Jesus's behalf, either before or after Jesus's execution by the Romans. A man in a position of power, who had amazingly experienced the presence of the divine, chose to remain silent at that critical moment. It was yet another kick in the teeth for Jesus. It was just another instance of not being recognized as the incarnated Son of the One True God.

No good deed goes unpunished. Somewhere between the ages of 8 to 12, we begin to learn that lesson. You stand up for a buddy who's getting punched, and you get punched instead. You try to befriend a certified "jerk" and end up being certified into that classification as well. It gets worse as we get older and the stakes get higher. Who do you stand up for and support in your work place, in the public place — even though they might not be your most chosen people? Jesus chose to save. You want to hear a characteristic that's so irritating about Jesus? Jesus didn't choose to save the chosen, the winners, the big shots.

In the Old Testament, in Job 1:9, Satan answers the Lord with a question: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" That curious phrase "for nothing" needs some explanation. "Fearing God for nothing" is where "for nothing" can also mean "as a gift." In other words, Satan is testing whether Job is in a God-relationship — not for what Job can get out of it — but "for nothing." Is Job interested in God for God's own sake, for reverence of God's name and not for gaining any reward or praise in return?

Do we worship God “for nothing?” Do we serve God “for nothing”? Do we do good “for nothing”? Do I stand up here and preach “for nothing”? Do we worship, do we serve God for God’s sake, or for our own sakes? When you truly live a life of following Jesus, you leave behind your calculations and machinations, your give-and-take, your rewards and punishments. You love the Lord “for nothing.”

In the ancient Jewish faith which Jesus was raised in, there was a hierarchy of charity. We could call them “levels of love.” Be that as it may (we don’t have time to talk about all eight), the seventh level is “the giver knows not to whom he gives, nor does the recipient know from whom he receives.” In other words, the giver doesn’t know to whom the gift is given and the receiver doesn’t know who offered the gift. That’s why Jesus says, “when you give money, don’t let your left hand have any idea what your right hand is up to” (Matthew 6:3). The gift is a gift — pure and simple — from both sides.

That’s a gift as it’s supposed to be. A gift must both be given and received. Giving is often easier than receiving. There’s nothing more difficult than receiving a gift. Grace is a big pill to swallow. These gospel stories tell us that. The woman with the internal bleeding is healed. She praises God and Jesus sends her on her way: “Go in peace. Be healed from your illness.”

Jesus then saves the life of a young girl. He literally resurrects her from death, and yet afterwards there’s nothing. And when Jesus later gets accused of madness by the religious and political establishment, those he had done the most for were those who were the most silent. They may not have been the ones actually yelling for him to be crucified — but, hey, their silence turned out to be just as deadly for Jesus.

Isn’t that the way things in this world are? The people you do the most for end up being the very ones to betray you and belittle you. But sticking with Jesus, you still do good always and in all ways, anyways.

The world, of course, sees that as utter madness. But “Jesus madness” is God’s wisdom. You might say that what the world needs isn’t less madness, but more madness. I’m a disciple of Jesus the Messiah, so I know love. I know love because I’m loved. Unconditionally.

I know what love is supposed to look like and feel like. I know how I’m supposed to love because Jesus invented the come-as-you-are culture. Therefore if I’m a believer in Jesus Christ I must follow in his ways. The Way. Love.

It’s an odd thing when you think about it: That I must act, feel, support and have my own soul entwined with other people in such a way that it provokes a deafening reaction of realness, contentment, and security that are sunken deep into the core of both mine and the other person’s being. That’s what love is. Tangible. Measurable. “Children, let us not love in word, or in speech, but in deed and in truth,” that’s what some old preacher, John, once told his congregation (1 John 3:18).

Love is real and truthful. Love causes tears of joy. It causes a pause that elicits a quivering deep breath of exhaustion and relief with the understanding that the root of the most pain is finally engulfed in the core of the most secure of places. Who’s that most secure place? That’s right — Jesus. Love. That’s our command. It’s our kingdom job description. There are no two ways around it. The Bible tells us that it’s the Holy Spirit’s job to convict; God’s job to judge, and ours to love. This is what it means to practice in the Way. That Way. The Jesus Way.

The challenge of our time isn’t how correct we can be. It’s not about how much of a defender of our faith we must be to keep out all so-called heretics, haters and hooligans. We must stop being driven by fear of the future and focus on how to love well in the here and now.

Right now. Someone who I have great regard for once told me, “I continue to find myself caring less and less about what each respective person professes to believe, and more about how they profess those beliefs in word and deed.”

Oh. Maybe it matters to some of us, maybe it doesn't, but this person and his husband are gay. They love Jesus and steward their life together as Christian disciples.

I have tried to resist causing anyone to feel ashamed as to who they are and what they believe. I'm sorry if I have ever done so. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. So what I am suggesting is that if our congregation is to start having safe, hospitable, honest conversations with one another regarding human sexuality and LGBTQ inclusion as we prepare for the United Methodist General Conference — now scheduled for August 29 to September 6, 2022 — we must first commit ourselves and our diverging opinions to the radical love that's irrevocably tied to the One we claim as our Lord and Savior.

“Someone who doesn't love a brother or sister whom they have seen, how can they love God, whom they haven't seen? This is the command we have from him: anyone who loves God should love their brother or sister too” (1 John 4:20-21). That's the madness of Jesus.

Who are our brothers and sisters? Other believers? Those who look like us? Who agree with us? Who act like us? If people from the other side are not a part of what we're doing, we're not actually crossing the bridge toward God's kingdom. The madness of the world tells us to not even try. In fact, the madness of the world tells you to chop the other person's head off. But the madness of Jesus tells us to go forward together, to love and accept one another, to deepen our relationships, to see what the outcome could be.

Who and what gives you life? Is it to the fidelity and action of Jesus's madness — the best case scenario for growing into a faithful life of mature discipleship? Or is it the unteachable madness of a world that's so full of itself? We do need more madness in the world, but not the world's madness. We need more Jesus madness — the madness that does good always and in all ways, anyways.

Sobeit. Amen.

