

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Seventh Sunday After Pentecost – July 1, 2018 – SUMMER of HEALING
Communion Sunday
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister
Mark 5:21-43

FOR REFLECTION

“We believe empowering women to be better consumers for their pain management care, sensitizing the general public to gender pain disparities and enlightening public policy makers about pain as a major health issue will improve life outcomes for all women in chronic pain...We see increased medical research about the differences in how men and women experience pain as part of the answer to alleviating the toll of human suffering. We believe medical research will pave the way for gender-specific therapies that will better manage persistent pain.”

~ www.forgrace.org

“It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.”

~ Jiddu Krishnamurti, Indian philosopher (1895-1986)

Healing Our Daughters

There are two daughters in our story today. The framing story is about the terminally ill 12-year-old daughter of Jairus, a “leader of the synagogue.” In synagogues today, the spiritual leader is the rabbi. But 2000 years ago, there were a number of leaders, one of whom:

...was an official appointed by the elders to look after the building, its contents, and its arrangements for worship.

www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t94/e1645

These people were usually unpaid – and did the work of a sextant, a trustee and a board of deacons. This would indicate some amount of dedication to the religious life of his community. And yet that religious community cannot help him now. So here is such a leader on the ground at Jesus’ feet begging repeatedly for his healing services. Eventually they make it home, the girl has died, but Jesus resurrects her – and she is healed of both a deadly disease and death itself.

In the middle of this story is a story about another daughter who has no father to plead her cause. She is older (how much older we don’t know) and the medical community has failed her. She is bleeding and has been bleeding for 12 years, the length of time Jairus’ daughter has been alive.

Blood is viewed as both sacramental and polluting depending on the context. The blood of sacrifices to G-d and the blood of circumcision honor G-d. The blood of

women pollutes all that it touches, especially men. So, for this woman to reach out and touch this holy man is a major social and spiritual violation.

The fact that Jesus (feeling this life-giving, healing power or chi exit his body) recognizes her act as an act of faith rather than a violation is the twist that Mark's audience doesn't expect. Fearing his judgment, the woman is on the ground at Jesus' feet – occupying the same piece of dirt that Jairus' recently occupied – potentially polluting that holy ground – and she is, instead, lifted up as a faithful and celebrated “adopted” daughter of G-d.

As with a number of healing stories in our gospels, our daughter is not only healed of her malady – but she is restored to her community – no longer a pariah hidden away at home – able to have a social and religious life. She is healed both physically and psychologically – cleansed of shame and self-loathing. She is given her life back as a whole person. She is resurrected much like Jairus' daughter – from the tomb of isolation and social shunning.

These stories – like many in our gospels – these stories in the context of their time and culture – are stunning. Sons are the treasures of the family. They carry on the family name and are, therefore, a man's immortality. Sons inherit the family property and resources. Sons carry the burden of helping their fathers support the family – and later support their own families. A woman who bears a son is honored; a woman who bears only daughters or is barren is a pariah.

Daughters are considered financial liabilities. They can contribute to family comfort by doing housework and feeding the men. But when it comes to marriage, they have to have a dowry – a financial reason for a man to marry her – and dowries can be a burden. Feeding and nurturing girl babies is expensive and often minimized – especially when those resources could go to a son.

Throughout history we have seen daughters treated as second or third-class citizens within families as well as societies. My own grandmother was told that if she hadn't been born, her brother could have had a better education. As it was, he went to college and she didn't. I raved about RBG a few weeks ago – but I will add that when Ruth Bader Ginsberg went to law school she was accused of taking a seat in the classroom that, by rights, should have gone to a man.

The grandmother that deprived her brother of a better education ended up giving birth to two girls. Her husband always wanted a boy – so he raised my mother to be athletic and called her “Ace.” I found a book in my mother's things that is a life-review journal. One of the questions is, “What did you want to be when you grew up?” First on the list are the words, “A boy.”

When I was 6 years old a parishioner visited the house. I remember standing in a doorway when she stopped in front of me and asked, "Do you ever wish you were a boy?" I was stunned and confused by the question. I said, "No." But for years I wondered why she would even ask that. I figured it out later when I learned about gender disparities, birthrights, and male dominance. And I wondered if SHE wished SHE was a boy – like my mother did.

Even with all my education, I didn't learn about the systematic reduction of female populations in some cultures until much later. It may have been when Hillary Rodham Clinton was First Lady and attended the U.N. Fourth Congress on Women in Beijing in 1995. That's when I found out about all the missing girls.

The term "missing women" indicates a shortfall in the number of women relative to the expected number of women in a region or country. It is most often measured through male-to-female sex ratios, and is theorized to be caused by sex-selective abortions, female infanticide, and inadequate healthcare and nutrition for female children. It is argued that technologies that enable prenatal sex selection, which have been commercially available since the 1970s, are a large impetus for missing female children.

I'll say here that prenatal sex selection may be a large impetus now – but female infanticide and neglect have existed since the dawn of time.

Many Neolithic groups routinely resorted to infanticide in order to control their numbers so that their lands could support them. Joseph Birdsell believed that infanticide rates in prehistoric times were between 15% and 50% of the total number of births...The children were not necessarily actively killed, but neglect and intentional malnourishment may also have occurred, as proposed by Vicente Lull as an explanation for an apparent surplus of men and the below average height of women in prehistoric Menorca.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Infanticide#Paleolithic_and_Neolithic

Anyway, back to the modern issue of missing women:

The phenomenon was first noted by the Indian Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen in an essay in The New York Review of Books in 1990, and expanded upon in his subsequent academic work. Sen originally estimated that more than a hundred million women were "missing." Later researchers found differing numbers, with most recent estimates around ninety to 101 million women. These effects are concentrated in countries typically in Asia, the Middle East and northern Africa. However, the disparity has also been found in Chinese and Indian immigrant communities in the United States, albeit to a far lesser degree than in Asia. An estimated 2000 Chinese and Indian female unborn children were aborted between 1991 and 2004, and a shortage can be traced back as far as 1980. Some countries in the former Soviet Union

also saw declines in female births after the revolutions of 1989, particularly in the Caucasus region....

According to Sen, even though women make up the majority of the world's population, the proportion of women in each country's population varies drastically from country to country, with various countries having fewer women than men. This runs contrary to research that females tend to have better survival rates than males, given the same amount of nutritional and medical attention. To capture this divergence from natural sex ratios, the count of "missing women" is measured as a comparison of a country's male-to-female (or female-to-male) sex ratio compared to the natural sex ratio. Unlike female mortality rates, estimates of "missing women" include counts of sex-specific abortions, which Sen cites as a large factor contributing to the disparity of sex ratios from country to country. Furthermore, **female mortality rates fail to account for intergenerational effects from female discrimination, while a comparison of a country's sex ratio to natural sex ratios would.**

Sen's original research found that while there are typically more women than men in European and North American countries (at around 0.98 men to 1 woman for most countries), the sex ratio of developing countries in Asia, as well as the Middle East, is much higher (in number of males for each female). For example, in China, the ratio of men to women is 1.06, far higher than most countries. The ratio is much higher than that for those born after 1985, when ultrasound technology became widely available. Using actual numbers, this means that **in China alone, there are 50 million women "missing" – that should be there but are not. Adding up similar numbers from South and West Asia results in a number of "missing" women higher than 100 million.**

According to Sen, "These numbers tell us, quietly, a terrible story of inequality and neglect leading to the excess mortality of women."

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missing_women

What is interesting to note in this same article are the consequences of this lack of women: Societal health problems due to physical neglect of girls and women, missing Brides, and an excess of men who are more likely to feel outcast and suffer from feelings of failure, loneliness and associated psychological problems. Note that two of the three consequences are related to negative effects on men. The bias is evident even in the research.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missing_women

Now there are some signs of hope in China:

“Study finds millions of China's 'missing girls' actually exist”

A controversial one-child policy that resulted in as many as 60 million "missing girls" in China, the most populous country on Earth. But in a new study, researchers suggest that around 25 million of these girls aren't actually missing, but went unreported at birth -- only appearing on government censuses at a later stage in their lives.

<https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/01/asia/china-missing-girls/index.html>

Most of those girls are in rural areas where the one-child policy was less likely to be enforced.

There are also signs of hope in other parts of the world – hope that women’s lives may be perceived as equally valuable to the lives of men. The #metoo movement is one of those signs – as women gain courage with numbers and solidarity – and society changes its prevailing values around sexual abuse and sex-trafficking.

All of this is to say – imagine how revolutionary the stories in our scriptures were 2000 years ago. Jesus – perceived emissary and embodiment of G-d – was actually interested in the health and well-being of women – of daughters and wives and mothers and widows. To him – women’s lives mattered – not just because the leader of the synagogue asked him to care – but because he believed they mattered intrinsically.

The Gospel of Mary Magdalene – handily left out of the canon – describes a teacher-student relationship between Jesus and our Mary that was unheard of even when Ginsberg was in law school. The jealousy and reactions of the male disciples are also recorded there – and of course Paul and the other founders of Christianity as a religion did what they could to reestablish the gender hierarchy within the Jesus Movement – which worked for 2000 years.

If our religion – our version of the Jesus Movement now – can reclaim the revolutionary equality of women in our communities – tell these mind-blowing stories to every girl we know – it will go a long way toward healing the minds and souls and self-concepts of our daughters and granddaughters.

In the face of fundamentalist Christianity, in the face of a sexual-predator president and his cronies, in the face of a congress hell-bent on stripping health-care and civil rights from the female population, we have our work cut out for us in this country alone.

May our daughters be blessed – not just by our thoughts and prayers – but by our actions.

Mark 5:21-43

21 When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. 22 Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, **fell at his feet** 23 and begged him repeatedly, **"My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live."** 24 So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him.

25 Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. 26 She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. 27 She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, 28 for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." 29 Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.

30 Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" 31 And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" 32 He looked all around to see who had done it. 33 But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, **fell down before him**, and told him the whole truth. **34 He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."**

35 While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" 36 But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, **"Do not fear, only believe."** 37 He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. 38 When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. 39 When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." 40 And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. **41 He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!"** 42 **And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age).** At this they were overcome with amazement. 43 He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.