

Mark 5:21–43

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 28 June 2012

The texts for Pentecost 5 hit a double reality of living a life in faith. The first reality is the reality of affliction. An inherent part of the life of faith is coming head to head, face to face, with the afflictions of everyday life. Instead of going away as advertised, they seem to multiply. Not many of us live like Job, but we are all familiar with the litany of sufferings the apostle Paul encountered, and we have experiences of our own to add to the list. When Jesus said, “If they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?” he was telling us to anticipate carrying the cross. So we know what this means. We will bear the cross, and all our lessons today, the gospel included, pick this up.

Lamentations 3:22–33 assures us that God does not willingly afflict the human heart. But that statement has the same kind of ambiguity as the petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Lead us not into temptation.” If God does not afflict willingly, he nevertheless does afflict. While Luther can say that God indeed tempts no one to sin, he can also acknowledge that Christian faith finds its life, finds its home, in the midst of the contraries and difficulties of everyday life.

Psalms 30 picks up the same theme: “Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” Somehow, while the joy dispels the weeping, the reality of the weeping remains. It never quite goes away.

2 Corinthians 8:1–9, 13–15 continues these marvelous lessons we’ve been getting from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. This time he is working on the Corinthians to continue their generosity. He wants to make sure their benevolence doesn’t fail, and so he speaks to them directly of another congregation. I believe it’s Thessalonica or Philippi; in the intervening days my Alzheimer’s took that away. It’s one of those two, anyway. And he speaks of their marvelous generosity in the midst of affliction.

This is one of the sure signs of affliction: rather than nullifying generosity, it compounds it. And there’s no better place to see that than Africa, where the faith is fresh, where people are still deep in the sources and face to face, of course, with affliction. One of the unforgettable

experiences of my whole life was standing with a Maasai man in his little boma, a little roundhouse that looks like a grain bin with a conical roof. He had three bags of ugali cornmeal stacked up there. I think Tom might have been with me; I can't remember. We were standing talking to him, and I asked him through the translator how many bags of cornmeal he usually had for a year. He said eleven. I said, "How many did you harvest this year?" He said seven. I said, "But I only see three." He said, "Well, I've learned through drought that I can get along on three, and some of my neighbors didn't have any. So I gave four away." More than half. That's generosity in the midst of affliction. And of course when you see it, the impression is practically overwhelming. You never forget it.

I remember standing, with my paunch hanging out, at a church service where they were auctioning off gifts that had been given in kind. A man bought me some bananas, a whole bunch of sugar bananas, just gorgeous. I said, "Boy, is that ever nice of you." He looked at me and said, "You looked hungry." Well, I was, as a matter of fact. This is characteristic of affliction: rather than hardening the heart, it can soften it. And that's exactly what happens.

So we'll look at these three lessons and then come to this incredible gospel, which is just spilling over, multiplied times two. We get this woman whose living has been taken away by the doctors. Sound familiar? Probably the doctor was a Concordia graduate, and the hospital administrator had gone to Concordia too and learned how to be an effective administrator and so draw a higher salary than the doctor. Between them they had picked this woman, and any other who came close, clean. So she's broke. She has nothing, and she is looking for a magician, and she mistakes Jesus for one. Just a gorgeous story. And then to top that, if anything can possibly top it, we get the daughter of Jairus, this sweet little girl who is dying and is awakened by our beloved Lord. Good as it gets.

Lamentations 3: Though He Cause Grief

So here we go, the supporting texts first. Lamentations is a radical book. Of course we overlook it; we get only a few lessons, if more than one, from the book of Lamentations. But in my personal Bible reading I always like to linger over Lamentations as I go scurrying along through all the books of the Bible. I love to stop there, because the author of Lamentations, whether it is Jeremiah or one of his students, knows these two realities. He knows suffering, and he knows grace in the midst of suffering. And so he puts them together side by side. One verse: "Great is your faithfulness." And the next: "You have abandoned us, O Lord." He is trenchant and tough, and full of faith.

Verse 32 says it plainly: “Though he cause grief.” There we go, there we go. Though he cause grief. The Scripture and the church itself are reluctant to say this: that he causes grief, that God is actually the cause of suffering and death. The church wants to ascribe it to other causes. But when you say that God is in charge of everything, that everything that happens passes in review before him before it happens, you have to say that if he didn’t actually do it, he at least had a hand in it. If he didn’t do it, he allowed it to happen. And if he allowed it to happen, he is an accessory after the fact. You can’t get God off the hook on this stuff, and so the ambiguity remains. “Though he cause grief,” it says. That’s about as plain as it gets: God is implicated in the cause of grief. We have to say this.

Now some Christians will say, “I never want to believe that, because then you’re praying to the one who caused the trouble.” But just a minute; don’t let that scare you away. Better that he should cause the trouble than somebody who is out of control. And that is what this verse comes to: “Though he cause grief, he will have compassion.” That’s what we’re betting on: that this one reality, God’s implication in suffering, is joined by the other reality, the power of his help in the midst of suffering.

So now, in the typical fashion of Jeremiah or one of his students, we get them side by side. God is implicated, and yet as God is implicated, we know that he knows where the end of this grief is going to come. “He does not willingly afflict.” This is not something he enjoys or wants to put us to, but he knows its necessity.

You all remember, hopefully, Luther’s discussions of God’s left hand and God’s right hand. In traditional society, in the society of Scripture and of Luther’s time as well, your right hand is your social hand. It’s the hand you shake hands with and the hand you put around somebody. In a culture that doesn’t have sinks readily available, your left hand is your toilet hand. You use it to take care of your personal hygiene, and so you don’t want to extend it to your neighbor. There is such a thing as too much sharing; you get a little too intimate. So you keep your left hand behind you, or at your side, where it performs these functions, so that you don’t offend your neighbor. Extend your left hand to somebody in a traditional culture and you’ll get a knuckle sandwich, because that’s a real insult.

So Luther uses the traditional language of left and right, not because he is right-handed and thinks all lefties are sinister, but because this is the traditional way of speaking: God uses his left hand to push us to his right hand. He does some alien things to push us to his proper work, to the hand of the gospel, to his right hand, where all the goodness comes. Though the

author of Lamentations doesn't use this language, he is making a somewhat similar distinction. The left hand is not the last hand. The left hand is preliminary. The suffering is not forever; the suffering will end. If God afflicts you, the purpose of the affliction is to drive you to his right hand.

And I'll bet you dollars to donuts that if you look back over your life of faith, you will find that these times of suffering, these times of pain, have been the times of most intense development, the times when you really grew, when you were deepened. You bet your life. In my own odyssey, I get going a hundred miles an hour, I forget to pray, and I start drifting away from Scripture. When that left hand comes down, boy, I can't get enough. I'm after the Word hot and heavy. I want it so bad I can't stay away from it. Well, this is the way it works. God uses his left hand to drive us to his right.

Psalm 30: Mourning into Dancing

Now the psalm picks up the theme. This is one of my favorite psalms. Of course, you should never pick out favorite psalms, because it's like your kids: they should all be your favorites. But this is a beauty, Psalm 30. I can remember times in my life and ministry when Psalm 30 put a hand on the back of my shirt and held me. "You have turned my mourning into dancing."

"As for me, I said in my prosperity, 'I shall never be moved.'" Verse 6. Of course, this is what sinners think. "I've got it under control now. I'm impregnable. I'm beyond any kind of difficulty. I'm beyond reach. I can do what I need to do. Nobody can harm me now." I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved." "You hid your face; I was dismayed," and it all went down the toilet. God's favor was withheld, and down I went.

We all know this experience. The bigger and stronger you are, the more vulnerable you become. That's the way it goes. Just when we think we're beyond reach, we get hit and we go down. You hid your face, and that was the end of it. I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved," and you hid your face, and my prosperity went down the toilet. There it is: ashes to ashes.

But the psalmist will not stop there. The good Lord who is the cause of the fall is also the source of the resurrection, and so the psalmist goes right after him. I just love this. "Will the dust praise you?" Do you have some advantage with me lying here disassembled? Is that how it's going to go? He goes right after the good Lord, and then a song of thanksgiving erupts: "You have turned my mourning into dancing." So that's the other side. And oftentimes the

dancing takes place in the morning. That's really something. You get into the pit, and you think there's nothing there but the pit. And while you're in the pit, you hear God's voice, and you come out of it. So there are both sides.

One of the paradigmatic memories I have (you'd better be careful now, I'm starting to remember) is of going out to the funeral of my closest friend down in southern Oregon. I thought I was going to die myself when he died. He died at his daughter's wedding of a massive heart attack, and when he died, I almost went with him. That night I went home, reached into my pocket, and found his teeth. I had been giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, and I just stood there and screamed. When I came out to do the funeral, his widow was sitting in the front row, and she looked up at me and smiled. That smile was the gospel itself. That smile in the midst of the turmoil was the sheer goodness, the sheer mercy of Christ Jesus coming to uphold. Here we go: the two go together, the drowning and the dancing, the mourning and the singing. They go right side by side.

2 Corinthians 8: Generosity in Affliction

And with that we can get a sense of 2 Corinthians 8. It puts together in a marvelous way, as I indicated earlier, affliction and generosity. Most of the time one rules out the other. But here Paul can speak marvelously of what all of us who bury the dead and care for the sick learn quickly: God's generosity in the midst of affliction. It's unusual, that's for sure. But it gets to the point where you know that when affliction comes, goodness is going to come with it. That's part of the fun, part of the joy. You know that even when the whole thing is tipped over, Christ Jesus is going to pop up with the word of the resurrection.

Mark 5: Two Stories in One

Now, we've been monkeying around long enough with these supporting texts, because we've got one of the great gospel texts ever for this Sunday. It's really two in one. You know how it is when you start telling stories. One story prompts you to think of another, and pretty soon you're telling two stories at once. That happens to the author of the Gospel of Mark. He is telling a beautiful story of the president of the synagogue whose little girl was sick. That by itself would be enough to alert you that something big is happening, but in fact there's more to come. While he is telling the story of the little girl and her father and of Jesus going up to the little girl's room, he is reminded of another one. So the first story in our text is the story of this dear woman.

This woman has been afflicted in the most serious sort of way, and it's doubled. She has a hemorrhage, twelve years of it. We can guess that it was probably something private we shouldn't speculate about. It was a flow of blood, and this flow of blood not only contaminated her biologically, it contaminated her religiously as well. So here is a woman doubly excluded. Her bleeding excludes her from the hygiene of the community, and it excludes her from the ritual cleanliness of the community. So now she's out of luck.

She apparently had some money, at least enough to start looking for doctors. Of course, this is what we do. When we get sick like this, we go looking for a doctor, and when one doctor doesn't work, we go looking for another. When my friend who died recently was sick this spring, he had a rare disease called amyloidosis. He started looking for a doctor, and pretty soon he was the subject of a national consultation; the doctors were looking for him because the disease was so unusual. It didn't help. In the end he died anyway. But you know how it works.

This woman did not have the advantage of any kind of health care, of course. This is the kind of society some people in this country look back to nostalgically as the true economic order. How you can believe that, I don't understand. This woman has spent all her money on doctors, and of course there has been more than one charlatan in there. They have milked her dry. She is bleeding, she is excluded, and she is just sick about it in every conceivable way. These fellows descended on her and took her whole income.

Now, this is one of the most interesting stories of all. Ernst Käsemann has a theory I've told you about before concerning the Gospel of Mark: that the original Christians were charismatics, and that their primary interest in Jesus was as a wonder-worker. Dave Tiede has done all kinds of research on this. These wonder-workers had certain stocks in trade. One was healing through their clothing. This is Oral Roberts: "Send me a hanky; I'll bless it, and if you give me enough money, that blessing will heal you of your illnesses." The healing is in the cloth. Or the healing is in touch, and so you get lots of miracles in the Gospels where Jesus touches the person and healing comes. Other times there are healings by spit. There's a wonderful story where Jesus spits and anoints the man's eyes and says, "Do you see anything?" and the man says, "I see men, but they look like trees, walking." I love that. And then Jesus lays his hands on him again and he gets well.

This is what Mark does. Mark comes from a later community that is very concerned about this thaumaturgical interpretation of Jesus, that he is a wonder-worker. So he is correcting

these miracles, and watch what he does with this one. The woman sneaks up on Jesus in the crowd and touches his garment, and healing passes out of his clothing into her, and she is made well. Wow, she got it.

But now the worst of all possible things happens. Jesus says, “Who touched my garments?” And the disciples say, in effect, “If you don’t want to get touched, stay out of crowds. Go home with all the other INTJs and sit in marvelous isolation. If you’re going to come into a crowd, you’re going to get touched.” No, they didn’t quite say that. But as he was looking around to see who had touched him, this woman, scared to death, came forward. Now listen to our Lord. Listen to what he says: “Daughter, your faith has made you well.” It’s not my clothing that made you well, lady; it’s your faith. He speaks the word, and he challenges the miracle of the clothing and makes it a miracle of faith. This is how it works. Faith clings to God’s word, and God’s word brings the healing. It’s not the clothes.

We were down in Ashland last night, and they had a wonderful set of plays, one of them taken from the Marx Brothers, Groucho, Harpo, and Chico. It was really fun. One of the brothers is a great pickpocket, and he is standing there talking to a lady and hands the lady her own brassiere, as though he had taken it off without her knowledge. It was hilarious. Maybe that’s not as funny in the retelling. Anyway, the healing is not in the clothing; it’s in the word. And so this woman who has been abused by the doctors is freed by Jesus even from himself. It’s not my clothes, lady. It’s the word, God’s word, and your faith in his word. Instead of exerting his power over her and trying to keep her under his sway, he turns her free. This is how the miracles work. He gives health and wholeness and a return to the community. Now both forms of uncleanness are gone, and this woman can go to coffee parties and sit there comfortably, knowing she’s not besmirching anybody. It’s just fabulous.

Talitha Cumi

But that’s just the beginning in this text. Holy smokes, here we go. A lot of you know that I grew up with another language. I was the oldest in our family, and I got in on enough Norwegian that I could get along fairly well, though I lost it in first grade. It was taken away, and neither my sister a year younger, nor my brother, nor my little sister got the language. So my little sister went to Norway and picked it up, but that’s another story.

Anyway, I grew up with bilingual people. Bilingual people are very interesting, because there is one language they use for the heart and another they use for the street. Tom can tell you

about this; from living in Africa he has three or four languages in his own mouth. When I was a kid, we told the front end of the joke in English, and the punch line was always in Norwegian. When we prayed, it was in Norwegian. When we spoke words of love, it was not appropriate to use the language we used in the drugstore. When we spoke words of love, we spoke our mother's tongue. You know my favorite story about that. When I was down in Arizona and some old friends of my family came and started speaking to me in my mother's tongue, it was as if somebody had grabbed me by the spine and lifted me. The whole thing just erupted, because that language is so full of love.

Well, these people are Aramaic speakers. Aramaic is a cousin of Hebrew, however you want to say it. Aramaic is a soft language. It's a farmer's language. It's a language for taking the dirt in your hands, for harvesting wheat, for taking your kid on your lap. It's a language full of tenderness, full of love itself. Koine Greek, which all of us were required to learn, is a whorehouse language. It's a language for the marketplace, for banks and lawyers and commercial exchange, hard-edged and tough.

Now listen to what has happened. When these Aramaic speakers communicate what they love, they use Greek. Why? Because the Holy Spirit has taught them this language, and because it is the language of mission. But when they are telling the story in Greek, they still remember the words in Aramaic. You bet they remember. Sheldon Tostengard and I used to have so much fun with the Norwegian word *akkurat*. It is so much more of a word than "accurate"; there's a lovely humor in it. Now Carolyn has a new car, an Acura, and I'm calling it her *akkurat*. It's just perfect.

So these are loving words. When you hear the bilingual community going back to the Aramaic, you know that this is sacred to them, that this story is right at the center. They are using their mother's language now, the language they learned at the breast, the language they learned when they were burped over their mother's shoulder and dandled on her lap. This is lovers' talk. And so Jesus goes into this room (this is so fabulous) and he says, "Talitha cumi": "Little girl, I say to you, arise." Which would you rather hear? Even if you didn't know any Aramaic, you'd rather hear the lovers' talk: Talitha cumi. Oh gosh, this is Jesus himself, so full of love.

What in the world is worse than losing a child? The only thing worse than losing a little one is losing one you've gone through the wars with, who has come out the other side of adolescence and become your friend. When you lose a child like that, the grief never ends. It's

grief that will recede, grief you may survive, but grief that just sits there and perks along, wounding, wounding, never letting go. It's grief that sets in for a lifetime. Jesus is in the presence of that kind of thing now. This is the ultimate: your own flesh, a little child.

Jairus is president of the synagogue. You know he's an up-and-comer. You know he's a religious man. You know he has heard all the wags talking about Jesus. He's heard all the stories, all the anxiety, all the criticism. But now when push comes to shove, when it's his little girl, ho, ho, he couldn't care less who Jesus is. He wants him, and so he sends for him.

And Jesus comes through this crowd, being groped by this old woman who is looking to touch him, poor thing. He comes through the crowd, and when they get there it's announced that it's too late. Well, I'll tell you, it's never too late when Jesus is around, not for a minute. Look at him. He comes striding through this crowd, and when they say she's dead, he says she's not dead but sleeping, and they think, "Oh, sure. That's not Lucky Strikes you've been smoking. She's dead. Get a life, you fool."

So Jesus pushes right past them. Isn't that great? This is his regard for medical opinion, and for the consensus on the state of the question. He won't stop. He comes barreling into that little girl's room. "Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but sleeping." "And they laughed at him. But 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. Taking her by the hand he said to her, 'Talitha cumi,' which means, 'Little girl, I say to you, arise.'" Time to get up. "And immediately the girl got up and began walking (for she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement." Well, of course.

This is Jesus at his very best. Oh, sure, there's some touch here. Sure, Mark is using old accounts in which touch and clothing are essential. But it's the word. It's the word. And that word is of such a character that it breaks into the ears of the dead. And so it breaks into the ears of sinners as well.

I just got a wonderful letter from an old friend, a class ahead of me at seminary, Tim Schuler. He's over in Wausau, Wisconsin. It was a magnificent letter. He translated a beautiful statement of Luther's about the suicide of Judas. Luther said: Judas hanged himself from a tree limb. I'm not going to do that, but I'm going to hang myself on Jesus' neck. And then when it comes time, the good Lord will say, "What's that hanging on your neck?" And Jesus will say,

“He’s been hanging on my neck forever. I just can’t get rid of him. Let him slip in.” Let him slip in. There you go. That’s the way it works.

The Word carries us through, even through the death of a child, even through the death of those nearest and dearest to us, those we can’t live without. The Word comes, and it becomes for us the word of love we first heard from our mothers and fathers, from those who loved us enough to say, “Christ is yours. Christ is yours.” And so, like ticks, we hang on his neck. Only he knows we’re on his neck, and he carries us. That’s the difference. He’s not trying to rub us off. He has attached us there, and that’s where we belong.

So you’ve got some texts you can really go to town with this time. You could preach on any one of these four, and you could preach till Friday. But I’d recommend that you go with that little girl, because this little girl is a witness to what is to come. That is why this is in Aramaic: texts of resurrection are in Aramaic, just as texts of affliction are, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani.” These are the holiest words in Scripture, and so the mother tongue is required.

Have I got you going? Is that enough? You’re great. Power to you. Have fun this Sunday. You’ve got texts that will carry you all the way home, even if people have left early for the Fourth of July. God’s peace to you. See you next week.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEiZ6ATGi-E>

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