

June 30, 2024

Mark 5:21-43

<sup>21</sup>When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. <sup>22</sup>Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet <sup>23</sup>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.”

<sup>24</sup>So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. <sup>25</sup>Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. <sup>26</sup>She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. <sup>27</sup>She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, <sup>28</sup>for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” <sup>29</sup>Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. <sup>30</sup>Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” <sup>31</sup>And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” <sup>32</sup>He looked all around to see who had done it. <sup>33</sup>But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. <sup>34</sup>He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

<sup>35</sup>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?” <sup>36</sup>But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe.” <sup>37</sup>He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. <sup>38</sup>When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. <sup>39</sup>When he had entered, he said to them, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.” <sup>40</sup>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. <sup>41</sup>He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!” <sup>42</sup>And immediately the girl got up and

began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. <sup>43</sup>He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

-----

The stories of Jesus healing the sick, especially those with a physical ailment, makes me question my faith. When the leader of the synagogue hears that his daughter has died, Jesus tells him, “Do not fear, only believe.” I would like to think I believe, but the people I know or have known, people I have prayed for fervently, especially those with cancer, have not been cured of their illnesses nor are they kept from dying.

Is this because I don’t believe, don’t have enough faith? This question has given me a scripture passage from Mark’s Gospel as the defining passage of my faith: “I believe, help my unbelief.” (Mark 9:24) As a pastor, as a supposed example of faith, does my questioning, my feeling I am lacking in faith mean am I a failure? I don’t have an answer to this question. I am not sure there is an answer to the questions of faith and healing. What I do know is that the question of healing in relationship to faith has not only allowed doubts about myself and faith to cloud my understanding, but also limited my relationship with and understanding of God.

Many years ago, as pastor of Amicable Church, I was struck by the fact that many Black churches in America begin their service with the pastor saying enthusiastically, “God is good!” The congregation responds, “Indeed, God is good!” And this call and response could go on for a while. It is very moving, very uplifting, so I thought I would incorporate it in my own congregation and worship service.

One Sunday, then, I introduced this worship element. As best I could, with as much enthusiasm as I could muster, I spoke: “God is good!” and I encouraged a response by putting this call and response in the bulletin. I am not a Black preacher and my congregation did not respond with conviction that day. But, I didn’t give up. The next Sunday I repeated the exercise – with similar results mirroring the previous week’s experience.

This time, though, something changed, in me. As I spoke the words – God is good – and looked out on the congregation as they

responded, I saw a mother with her two children sitting in the pew. She was a woman I knew well; a person of faith; a Sunday School teacher and she had cancer. I almost cried at that moment. And I thought, “How can I declare God’s goodness in the face of her life-threatening illness? How can I expect her to say God is good, when there was nothing good about her health circumstances?” She, in fact, died a year later.

The truth is my faith was shaken in that moment and I have been struggling with the public declaration “God is good” ever since. That opening-of-worship responsive element lasted only those two weeks, even though I did like the concept. After prayerful consideration I changed the declaration to “God is present!” And this call and response has opened my worship services ever since. It is a good work-around, but I have never stopped trying to understand how African Heritage churches here in the United States can so enthusiastically say God is good, when they, as a people, have been so maligned and mistreated all their lives, as individuals and collectively.

This was on my mind, when I stopped Rev. Goodwin, our Executive Conference Minister, during a break at our Conference’s Annual Meeting and I asked him how he viewed this conundrum. He shared with me a story about his grandmother. As she aged and had to deal with aches, pains, and illnesses, she told her grandson that just because God does not heal her body when she prays, doesn’t mean God is not a healer. Then Rev. Goodwin said to me, “Just because in any given moment life doesn’t seem good to you, that doesn’t mean the essence of God is not goodness. You have to take yourself out of the middle and put God there.”

OMG! What a revelation that was for me! What a help for my unbelief! God’s goodness has always been there. I have just been in my own line of vision, blocking God’s goodness – and God’s presence.

Life is hard. God is good. And I have been confusing the two most of my life.

Yes, life is hard. There is no answer to why there is evil in the world; why good people suffer; why some who are ill are cured and

others die. This does not mean God is not a healer. It means we just don’t know the answer to all the whys of life. Living with not knowing is very hard, but now I am trying to get myself out of the middle and put God there.

What helps me to do that is how I am finally beginning to name, to define God. God is Life. God is Love. God is Oneness, the Source of Being.

God is Life. Just look at the beauty, majesty, mystery of creation. Look at the ocean, the sky, the stars in summer on a moonless night; the flowers and the trees; the blue bird and the bees. It is all amazingly intricate and interdependent. Of course, my life has the good fortune, at the moment, to be able to stop and smell the roses, while so many suffer under war, violence, and starvation. Still, while life is hard, creation, life is beautiful and good.

God is Love. Even in the midst of loss and pain, love has the power to revive me. Love is what connects me to this intricate and interdependent life. Love can be hard, especially when a loved one dies, but love is what makes life meaningful.

God is Oneness, the Source of Being. In a way I will never understand, or maybe never even accept, Life’s hardness and Love’s sorrows are a part of the Oneness, part of the intricate and interdependence of life. The good and evil I experience are united in Oneness. And still, God is good.

In my quest for help in my unbelief I am grateful to Rev. Goodwin for moving me out of my own way and allowing me to see God better. I am trying to let go of my need to have the power of prayer proved and just accept that Jesus healed the hemorrhaging woman and woke the twelve-year-old girl, giving her and her parents her life back.

Moving forward I will try not to focus on my fears and my lack of faith, rather I will try to put God in the center of my life, trusting that in God all things are possible; trusting that God is good, even when life at any given moment is hard.

For this knowledge and so much more I thank God. Amen.