

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
June 27, 2021: Proper 8B
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud
2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

Our *Book of Common Prayer* reminds us that in death “life is changed, not ended.” Everything we in the church do to mark a death underlines that basic truth. Death is not the end of life, but rather a point in the journey of eternal life that Jesus promises. Our lessons for today explore this understanding of life. It is almost as if this Sunday morning service in the beginning of summer is a funeral.

Of course, the culture in which we live would argue with that. Why should we focus on death? Who wants to go to a funeral on a beautiful Sunday morning? Who wants to be so serious all the time? Wouldn't it be better to turn our backs on death and face the future? But it seems to me that those of us who pay attention to the stories of Holy Scripture and the liturgy of the church that makes the connection between the Bible and our daily lives—those of us who pay attention can find comfort and energy in the work that we do here this morning—and every Sunday morning.

Our culture may wish to close eyes and mouths in the face of sorrow and sadness, but surely we cannot pretend our grief away. Over 600,000 Americans have lost their lives to the novel coronavirus in the last 16 months. 159 people are missing in the collapse of an apartment building in Florida this week. The bodies of murdered children have been found on the grounds of what used to be called “Indian Schools”—that is, church and government run institutions that housed native North American children who had been taken from their families of origin in order to give them healthier and holier lives. The most recent reports are from Canada, but there were many such schools in the United States, as well. This is a horror that is being uncovered. There is more grief to come.

This week, even as we cautiously celebrate the easing of pandemic restrictions, and the kids jump up and down at the end of school, and the beginning of summer beckons us outside for recreation—even with all that to celebrate, we mourn as well.

And today's lessons help us do just that—to mourn with the appropriate sorrow over our collective grief. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that public lament actually helps us face the future. He says,

We have nearly lost our capacity for such grief. We are characteristically so busy with power, so bent on continuity, so mesmerized by our ideologies of control that we will not entertain a hiatus in our control of life to allow for grief. . . . [but] we still know that where loss is not grieved there are barriers to newness.¹

Even though Dr. Brueggemann was writing 30 years ago, his words describe this very Sunday morning. True words are like that, bridging time and space.

¹ *First and Second Samuel* by Walter Brueggemann, in *Interpretation: a Biblical Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 214.

Brueggemann was referring to the soaring poetry of King David—David’s moving elegy at the death of Saul and Jonathan that is today’s first reading. It helps to know that David had already been anointed by God to be the next king of Israel—the death of King Saul actually made his life easier. But then, as now, relationships are complicated. Saul was a bad king and a hard man to like, and yet, David mourns his loss—because he was a human being, and someone that David knew. And then, too, we have just read many chapters of David’s love of Saul’s son Jonathan. And Jonathan is dead, too. These deaths mean that it is more likely that David will finally become King—but David allows himself and the nation the time that it takes to express the loss of what was.

We know that David will move forward—because after all, even if we don’t remember the details, we know that David becomes the King, and we know that in another thousand years of so, one of David’s descendants will be Jesus. But David knows and models for us that “where loss is not grieved there are barriers to newness.”

A thousand years later, a baby is born in “the city of David.” We believe that Jesus is God, become one of us, born of a human mother, to show us that how much we are loved by God. That is, God does not love us at a remove—God lives right here with us—being a helpless baby, living for a while as a refugee in another country, growing up in poverty and under the strain of political oppression. Jesus is executed by a corrupt collusion of religious and civil authority. And then, God allows us to see that death does not have the last word—that in death, “life is changed, not ended.” And the tomb is empty, and people begin to make a new relationship with the resurrected Jesus.

Our Gospel story today comes from Jesus’ time among us as a teacher and healer. This little sandwich of stories seem to be about two healings, but really, I think there are three moments of transformation.

The first life that is changed is Jairus’s—and that change is noted as the story begins: “. . . *one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly. . .*” Earlier in Mark’s account, we heard that the scribes were critical, and the Pharisees were conspiring with the Herodians to go after Jesus. And here is another religious leader—but he is NOT agreeing with his colleagues. Jairus is reaching out to Jesus for healing for his little girl.

Jairus’s daughter is sick unto death. And he would do ANYTHING to make her better. And if that means he has to change himself—even if it means he has to leave his colleagues and strike out on his own—he will do it. When Jairus falls at Jesus’ feet, his life is changed forever. He doesn’t know it yet. But we do. We know that you cannot go against the power that employs you—at the very least, you will lose your job. So, when Jairus falls at Jesus’ feet, we know Jairus’ desire on his daughter’s behalf brings healing—a changed life—to him. Jairus is not following the religious establishment now—he’s following Jesus.

So that's one healing, and the story has barely started. But Jairus's declaration has the whole crowd excited, so they press around Jesus, following him on his way to see the little girl. And that is where the next healing happens.

All of a sudden, Jesus stops. *Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?"* And even though they are following Jesus, even though many of the people in the crowd have allowed for the possibility that following Jesus is a life-changer—even so, they must think Jesus is crazy! There is a crowd of people pressing around him. The question is, "Who ISN'T touching Jesus' clothes?" But Jesus can tell the difference between a jostle in the crowd and an intentional touch. And he feels the power within him go toward a person in need. The woman's 12 years of suffering end when the power of God is attracted to her and her life is changed forever.

And as long as that woman's suffering has been, is as short as the life of Jairus's daughter. We know that a twelve-year-old has barely started to live. She is not a woman yet—she is just a little girl. And her father has already changed his life so that she might have the chance to grow old. But it seems like Jesus is too late for the third healing in the story.

He gets to Jairus's house and they are told that the girl has already died. But Jesus doesn't believe it. *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. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!"*

Six years ago, I heard Katharine Jefferts-Schori preach on this story. Here is how she quoted Jesus, "He said, GIRL, get up! You aren't dead yet!" Bishop Katharine preached that sermon just a couple of days before she retired as the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church. You know, we all love our current Presiding Bishop Michael Curry so much that sometimes we forget that before our Presiding Bishop was the first black man to lead The Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts-Schori was the first woman to lead The Episcopal Church.

What do you do when you retire from such a position? What's next, after you have been sitting at the top for a while? Well, here is what Jesus has to say about that: "Girl! Get up, you aren't dead yet!"

In these three stories, Jesus shows us that healing is about change—about acknowledging where you are, and who you are, and still begging for the grace to know that life is changed, not ended.

This beautiful summer is full of possibility—and also, if we are honest and faithful, full of grief. And so we acknowledge the grief and beg for God's grace. And words of Jesus ring out, loud and true: CHURCH! Get up, you aren't dead yet!