***“With Equal Dignity”*** *a sermon delivered by Rev. Scott Dalgarno on June 30, 2024 based on Mark 5:21-43*

The story today begins with three people who, to use a common axiom, are at the end of their rope -- a dying little girl, the father of the dying little girl, and woman with a medical problem that has gone on way too long.

First we hear about the father --a man named Jairus, an esteemed member of the synagogue who came to Jesus and begged him to heal his little girl. With that, Jesus dropped what he was doing and began to accompany Jairus to his home.

Now, of the three people I alluded to a moment ago, only the father is actually mentioned by name. That fact alone offers us a window on the dynamics of First Century power and the place of women in the culture.

I envision Jairus’ wife as unwilling to leave the bedside of her daughter. She needs to be there to stroke the girl’s hair, hold the glass close to her lips, moisten the washcloth for her forehead. The father on the other hand, like any father, is out at the nurse’s station where someone there is paging the doctor.

He’s pacing up and down the hall, trying to get the attention of anybody who might address the desperate situation before which he feels helpless. I mean, is there anything in life that feels worse to us than feeling helpless.

So Jairus does what any self respecting father could and would do, he goes to a man he hears has healing power and begs him to come and save his child. As I said, he is at the end of his rope. His last hope is a faith healer about whom there is controversy in the synagogue; but he is willing to go to Jesus for help. What choice does her have?

And that leads to something I want to mention about Jairus, which is that his faith is not the most prominent factor in his appeal to Jesus. Faith? –

No, he is all desperation and parental love, driven as all of us who are parents are by the bedrock notion that no parent should outlive his child.

So he reaches out to Jesus, “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.” This is faith, but it is faith *in extremis*; faith pushed to the wall with no alternative.

Now on the way to Jairus’ house there was a woman lurking in the crowd, a woman with her own problems, her own fear. She’s desperate, and she’s alone.

*She had endured much*, the gospel writer, Mark, says, under many physicians, *and had spent all her money on getting well, and still she was no better.*

I have a lot of empathy for this woman, and I mean no ill toward physicians, but there are times when a person just can’t seem to make a dent in a male doctor’s armor, especially a woman. Either she is considered hysterical, or her symptoms are too vague, or she is a mixture of complaints so general and so abundant that it’s hard to sort out what is really going on with her.

Can you imagine what it might be like to be this woman? Suffering from what we men, ignorant as we are, refer to as “female problems.” Whatever condition she had, she suffered not only physical symptoms, but also pain, and social and religious ostracism. The book of Leviticus puts it succinctly:

*If a woman has a discharge of many days, not at the time of her impurity [and that word alone says a lot], ...all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness... Every bed on which she lies... and everything on which she sits shall be unclean... And whoever touches these things shall be unclean, and shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the evening. (Lev. 15:25ff.)*

What is it like to be so rejected by society and by your religious community that even the chair on which you sit will defile everyone who shares?

Such a self-understanding would take its toll on you; over time it would shape all that you are. After twelve years of that you would have learned to hang out in the shadows and blend into the woodwork and never draw attention to yourself.

I shall never forget a valued colleague of mine who received a positive HIV test. He said that the first word that came to mind for him was, “unclean.”

On the day that Jesus was said to be in her town this woman must have put a scarf around her head, covered everything but her eyes in the Middle Eastern way, and went out of her house like an assassin stalking her prey.

When Jesus and Jairus came by, she saw her opportunity. She moved forward unnoticed because of her veil, and when Jesus passed within arm’s length, she reached for the hem of his cloak.

At that moment, Mark says, she was healed and the hemorrhage stopped, and Jesus realized that power had gone out of him.

Power. This makes it sound like Jesus, without even knowing it, is a conduit for healing, a golden temple of goodness. It also makes one think of a surgeon leaving the operating table after a 12 hour session, or when a psychologist finishes a session with a patient whose life is suddenly in chaos; that sense that all your energy is gone. Maybe it was something like that.

Sensing this, Jesus stopped and asked, “Who touched my clothes?” The crowd thought it absurd that he would ask such a question. “Can’t you see that we’re all jammed in here, squashed together, how can you ask, ‘Who touched me?’” But the woman, knowing what she had done, and knowing, too, that she had broken convention, violating the prohibitions of the law, fell to her knees before Jesus and confessed that it was she who had touched him.

Jesus, takes compassion on her -- “Daughter, [daughter], your faith has made you well; go in peace.” And with only that much, not only did this woman receive healing, but also restoration to the community. Jesus, a rabbi with standing, calls her “daughter.” She is welcomed back to the fold and is received as a restored and respected member.

Now, note that Jesus didn’t say, “Unclean woman, go and wash yourself according to the requirements of the law.” No, he said, “Daughter, your faith has made you well.”

You know, I cannot overemphasize the gravity of his words and actions here. He offered her healing, yes, but look, he also offered her dignity.

Dignity. Something she had lost so long before she’d forgotten what it felt like. Now, hold that word in your head for a few more minutes. It’s important. It’s critical.

With his words twelve years of grief and fear and isolation and loneliness and desperation began finally to fall away. You think the healing was amazing? So was the restoration of her dignity. It means the restoration of herself to . . . herself.

Now while this was going on, word came that Jairus’ daughter had died. Some of the people around Jesus say, “Well let’s go home then, there’s nothing more to be done about the little girl. Let’s let the father grieve and we’ll bring over macaroni and cheese and some flowers and pay our respects in the morning.

But Jesus said, “Do not fear, only believe.” What’s going on here? When they get to the house everybody there in the room around the little girl are weeping and wringing their hands. There is no consoling the mother; she is broken.

Jesus said, why are you weeping? She is not dead, she is only sleeping.” And Mark says they all laughed at him. They all just laughed.

Which is a statement not so much about what Jesus said, but about what the crowd saw. The little girl was dead, and everybody knows that dead is dead, just look for yourself. Which is to say, everybody but Jesus saw that.

So he cleared the room and sent all the mourners out, because in the delivery room you don’t want a lot of people standing around crying, but rather people who are prepared to welcome a new beginning. And Jesus took the hand of the little girl, which is another point in this story where the religious law was being smashed to bits, because a righteous Jew in Jesus’ time did not touch the dead.

Jesus took her hand and said, *Talitha cum*, little lamb stand up, which Mark translates for us as meaning, “Little girl, I say to you, ‘arise.’”

And immediately, Mark says, she got up and began to walk about, and Jesus said, “Give the little sweetheart something to eat.”

So we have not one, but two stories that break all conventions, that are meant to open up the eyes of the cynical and those stuck in a world view that is dying..

First there’s the story about Jesus, loving a child so much, and full of empathy for her dad, breaking all convention; and second, that of a woman who has been sick so long she’s become invisible to the world and almost invisible to herself -- who’s dignity is returned to her by Jesus, a man who knows that life isn’t worth living without it.

It’s a story that tells us that healing -- real healing, is as much about the human spirit as it is about the human body.

With that in mind, listen to these words about dignity and healing written by Frank Bruni, New York Times columnist who happens to be a gay man. They were written in in 2015 when he was age 50. I mention his age because it’s important in understanding his own personal history as he celebrated at that time, (2015 – 9 years ago) the Supreme Court ruling, sanctioning gay marriage; a ruling that today is under threat from state legislatures all over this country.

Frank Bruni speaks here from his heart about how his life played out in a country where being gay was considered by some, suspect, by others, a tragedy, by others, horribly wrong.

*I can’t speak for everyone* (he says) *but I can speak for [myself as a] 12-year-old boy. He (he speaks of himself now in third-person) He stands out among his siblings because he lacks their optimism about things, even their quickness to smile. He has a darkness that they don’ havet. He’s a worrier, a brooder. He’s also more self-conscious. He can’t get comfortable with himself.*

*And while this may be his wiring, it may also be something else. He has noticed that his heart beats faster not for girls but for other boys, and the sensation is as lonely and terrifying as it is intense.*

*He doesn’t know what to do about it. He’s sure he’ll be reviled for it, because he hears all of the bigoted jokes that people aren’t necessarily aware that they’re telling, all of the cruel asides that they don’t always realize that they’re muttering. He craves some assurance that he’ll be spared their disdain and disgust. But the world hasn’t given him any.*

*I can speak for a 16-year-old boy. He has a word for what he is — “gay” or “homosexual” or something worse, depending on who’s talking — but he doesn’t have answers for what that’s going to mean. At the mall one afternoon, he surreptitiously breaks away from his friends and steals into a bookstore. He’s looking for something to quiet the fear inside him.*

*He finds an examination of “being gay in America” that’s called “Alienated Affections.” The phrase rattles him. It sounds like a diagnosis, or sinister prophecy. To understand it better, he riffles hurriedly through the pages, glancing over his shoulder repeatedly to make sure that no one’s watching.*

*The title of one chapter in particular catches his eye: “Beyond Gay or Gloomy: The Ordinary Miseries of Everyday Life.” Gloomy? Miseries?*

*He’s not sure he has the stomach for this, or the strength.*

*He closes the book, along with a bit of his heart.*

*I can speak for a 20-year-old college student. He has opened up to his family and to many friends about who he is, not because he possesses any particular courage but because being honest involves less strain, less effort than keeping secrets and dreading their exposure. Also because he wants to meet men like himself, even fall in love. And so far, there’s been no terrible price. His family doesn’t wholly understand him, but they want to and resolve to. For every friend who now keeps a distance, there’s another who draws closer.*

*He’s overwhelmed with relief. But he wishes there were a way to be honest without wearing a tag, without being put in a category, without one adjective preceding all others when people describe him. Their tendency to do so is a constant reminder that he’s not “normal.”*

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*Even the language in public discussions sends an ugly signal.*

*People are congratulated for their “tolerance” of gays and lesbians.*

*He is therefore someone to be tolerated.*

*I can speak for a 30-year-old man who lives in a house in the suburbs with another man his age. They’re a couple. A white picket fence surrounds the yard behind their red brick colonial. It keeps their German shepherd from straying off.*

*They have never hugged in the front yard, because what would the neighbors think? What would the neighbors do?*

*And there’s still plenty of oxygen for religious extremists who brand people like him wretched, evil, godless. In some countries these extremists do more than brand. They kill, and it’s a horrific thing to know and to see. In the man’s country, the extremists don’t often go that far, and they’re increasingly a minority, but they’re undaunted, unabashed and too often indulged.*

*He wonders when he’ll see more cracks in that indulgence. It’s time.*

*In 2015, on the last Friday of a month fittingly associated with both weddings and gay pride, there’s something bigger than a crack. There’s a rupture.*

*Following a few extraordinary years during which one state after another legalized same-sex marriage, the Supreme Court rules that all states must do so, that the Constitution demands it, that it’s a matter of “equal dignity in the eyes of the law,” as Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote* (**former** Justice Anthony Kennedy) *“Equal dignity in the eyes of the law,”*

*I can speak for a 50-year-old man who expected this to happen but still can’t quite believe it, because it seemed impossible when he was young, because it seemed implausible even when he was a bit older, and because everything is different now, or will be ...7And that’s because the Supreme Court’s decision wasn’t simply about weddings. It was about worth.*

Just as Jesus’ healings weren’t just about bodily distress but human dignity).

Well, people, this last Monday the vastly altered 2024 weaponized Supreme Court agreed to hear a case about transgendered Americans in it’s fall session.

Transgendered Americans are being told by one state legislature after another that they, like pregnant women, do not deserve the medical care they require to live normal healthy lives. That to get the care they require, they will have to move to states like this one, and because of this backward momentum in civil and equal rights, that they should fear that one day they may not even be safe in blue states.

They are not being allowed the “equal dignity in the eyes of the law” that all Americans deserve.

It is no exaggeration to say that we are at a crossroads in this country today, the like of which we have not seen since 1860. I have no doubt who Jesus would stand with at such a time as this.

*Amen*