

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, June 21, 2020

“Who Matters?” (Mark 5:21-43)

I remember that day vividly. I was sitting in my corner office in the Visa Section of the Canadian Embassy in Manila, quietly reviewing a stack of immigration files. A secretary, looking all flustered, came bursting into my office. There was a rude Canadian in reception loudly demanding immediate service. He wanted information about the status of an immigration application, and he was not prepared to talk with any lowly female, locally engaged employee. He insisted: he must speak with the Canadian officer in charge. As the one responsible for daily operations, and supervision of staff that was me. I wish you could have seen his face when he was ushered into my office and found himself in the presence of a woman. He was even less pleased when I informed him that I expected any and all Canadians to treat my staff with courtesy and respect. I didn't appreciate his upsetting the receptionist who was only trying to do her job. He brushed aside my concerns to launch once more into his demands. When I explained what this office was prepared to do for anyone making such inquiries, he was far from satisfied. He huffed: “Clearly, you do not know who I am!” That was true: even when he gave his name a second time, it rang no bells. “I am a friend of the Prime Minister. You will be hearing from Ottawa.” With that, he stamped out of the office. In his worldview, certain people mattered like men, especially those with connections, while others did not like women, particularly racialized receptionists.

In Jesus' society, certain people matter while others do not. The story Susan read today from the gospel of Mark highlights this. The crowds are surrounding Jesus, newly returned from the Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee where he healed a man in a truly desperate state. Jesus is approached by Jairus. This is a man who unlike Jesus has

done what is expected of good Jewish males: after establishing himself economically, he has married and become the father of at least one child. Jairus is a patriarch who is shouldering the responsibilities of providing for and protecting his family. When his daughter becomes ill, he seeks out help for her. Jairus is the sort of Dad who should get a lovely card and be feted on Father's Day. He is also a leader of the synagogue, a prized position, bestowing power and authority. When he speaks, people listen.

If we were to look for the equivalent of Jairus in our society whom might we name? A politician like Mayor John Tory or a religious leader like our Moderator, Richard Bott or a spiritual guide like Richard Rohr, the founder of the Centre for Action and Contemplation. Or how about a celebrity, a media star - someone who is used to commanding an audience. Have you ever noticed in a group how some individuals have a much easier time being heard? When I was ordained in 1984, women were pointing out that at annual meetings of Conference and assemblies of General Council, it was only men lining up at the microphones to speak. They were the ones steeped in Robert's Rules of Order who knew how to hold the floor. This shouldn't have come as a surprise. In general, in our society, men have an easier time getting their voices heard. A few years ago, when a trans man came to preach at Richmond Hill United Church, he noted that as he made the transition, as he began to attend meetings as a man, people were more willing to listen to the points he made, to consider his views. At Conference, special coaching was offered to women to help give us the expertise and confidence to take our place at the microphones. It wasn't long before it was noted that while youth were present at these meetings, their voices weren't being heard. More special coaching. Now, youth are amongst the most articulate. But the journey is not ended.

Still today, indigenous and racialized people too often feel silenced in this United Church of ours.

Jairus is used to being heard. He is an important man. Some of us may find it difficult to see ourselves in him. We may even be inclined to deny that we have any power and authority. But the reality is that each and every one of us has some, and it behooves us to identify and acknowledge the power and authority that is ours lest we unconsciously misuse it. Whether this power is based on our education, our ability to articulate our thoughts in one of Canada's official languages or our job, our position, our accumulated experience or our economic status or our gender, our sexual orientation or our race. That last is very much in the forefront these days as we talk about white privilege and the racism which is built into our institutions and organizations.

Jairus, as a male, as a father, as a leader of the synagogue has power and authority. He is used to being heard. At the end of his rope, worried that he might lose his child, he approaches Jesus directly to ask for what he wants. He assumes that once Jesus hears his need, this itinerant healer will immediately respond. And Jesus does.

The spotlight now shifts to a woman making her way through the crowds. Since Jesus' society is very much a patriarchy where women are known by their relationship to a man, be it their father, husband, son or brother, she automatically does not matter as much as Jairus or even his daughter since she doesn't have a male sponsor to speak up on her behalf. This nameless woman has been sunk even lower by illness. For twelve years, she has been hemorrhaging. Why that's as long as the synagogue leader's daughter has been on this earth. Given the life expectancy in the first century, twelve years is about a quarter of her lifetime. Can she even remember what it was like

to be normal - to have energy, to be free of pain? Considered “unclean” because of this bleeding, she would not be welcomed in the synagogue or at a dinner table. If the people in the crowd become aware of her condition, they will not be pleased to have her brushing by them. Talk about social isolation during this global pandemic and how hard it is on us emotionally and mentally, she is perpetually having to keep herself to herself. To make matters worse in her struggle to get better, she has spent all that she has on physicians. As a poor female outcast, who has had her hopes for healing dashed again and again, she has no reason to think her voice will be heard.

As we look at this skulking figure, do we see anything of ourselves; are we reminded of anyone in our society? The black man who fell asleep in the Wendy’s drive through only to be shot in the back by police. While in prison, he had pleaded that those in authority would treat him and his fellow inmates as human beings, and not as animals to be controlled. Or how about LGBTQ+ individuals in some parts of the world who know that to be honest about who they are could lead to imprisonment, torture and even death. Or men and women who are lumped together in groups such as drug addicts and sex workers, and simply expected to end up in trouble with the law or dead. When one of them tries to speak up, to argue they didn’t commit the crime or that disappearances need to be investigated, they tend not to be heard.

This unnamed woman is well aware that in her society, Jairus’ direct approach will not work for her. So she comes up behind Jesus, and reaches out her hand to touch his cloak, confident that just making this contact with his clothing will bring her healing. This is where the story takes an interesting turn. The woman is healed. Mission accomplished. Time for her to slip away. As for Jesus, he is on route to help a very sick

child who has her whole life ahead of her, a child from the right family with the right connections - an individual who matters. Every moment counts. And yet, Jesus stops. He turns about in the crowd, asking: "who touched my clothes?" As his disciples are quick to point out, this is a ridiculous question given there are people pressing all around him. Still Jesus persists. Why? Is he trying to make her own up to what she has done? Is he demanding a confession? The woman is certainly afraid as she steps forward. But listen to the way Jesus addresses her: "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." He calls this nameless woman "daughter". She may be poor. She may be an outcast, but he sees in her a beloved member of his own family. With this encounter, Jesus restores her to wholeness, to fullness of life. In God's realm of justice and peace, the realm Jesus is not only proclaiming, but also living into, this woman matters; the synagogue leader matters; his young daughter matters; each and every human being matters.

Jesus moves across the religious and social boundaries of his day to offer God's healing and restoring grace to one and all. In our time and place, how can we draw the circle ever wider, creating space for the marginalized to be heard, making sure everyone is treated as someone who matters?