

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from June 28, 2009

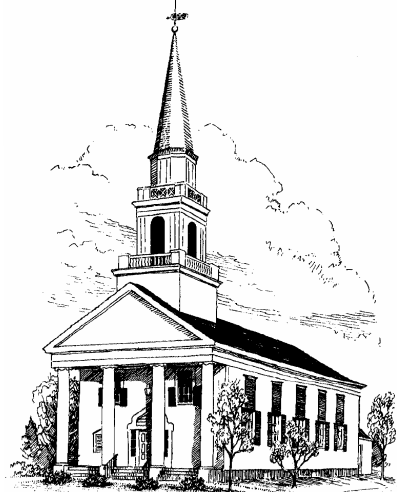
Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“Healed Memories, Healed Hope”

Scriptures:

Psalm 30

Mark 5:21-43



It doesn't always happen this way. No matter how faithful we are. No matter how hard we pray. No matter how desperate our pleas to God. It doesn't always happen that the bleeding stops, diseases leave the body, dying twelve-year old girls get up on command. It doesn't always happen that the fever miraculously breaks and she wakes up hungry. It doesn't always happen the way our story goes from Mark's gospel this morning.

Our story within a story today about two daughters is laden with symbolism, contrast, multiple levels of meaning, and there is almost no limit to the amount of written scholarly opinion on this passage. Although most *do* agree that this is one story among many in the Gospel of Mark with the same thrust and purpose: to let the reader know just who Jesus is and to reveal that God loves and includes and heals across all kinds of boundaries: gender lines, social taboos, age categories, socioeconomic strata, any separation we humans have made up to keep us from being one people of God. And with the references to twelve years of bleeding and a twelve-year old girl, we are reminded again of God's promise to Israel and its twelve tribes that God will not let Israel slip away.

Yet we know it doesn't always happen this way. We can pray and pray and promise and bargain and put the depth of our faith up against anyone else's, and still they slip away. The people we love who become sick don't always recover, are not always healed despite our prayer and faith.

As is the case with many women in the Bible, we are not given the names of the daughters in our gospel passage this morning; they are identified simply as the hemorrhaging woman and Jairus' daughter. Yet we all did come to know the name of another bleeding daughter this week. We and the rest of the world watched a daughter of Iran bleed to death, also on the street and in the midst of a crowd this week, slipping away on a video camera right before our very eyes. Neda. And another name came to us this week: Sara, the tiny little twin daughter we came to know fighting for her life over these past weeks in the neonatal ICU in New Hampshire. She could struggle no more this week and quietly slipped away in the night. Sara. Neda. And there are other names, and especially this morning, I am acutely aware of the daughters lost to the people of this congregation who have shared their pain with me over these last several months since my arrival. We remember one of them with our altar flowers this morning. Susan. And there's Pamela. And Alyson. And Anne Marie. And many, many more daughters everywhere ... and sons, too.

Jesus said to the hemorrhaging woman, "Daughter, your faith has made you well." And to the desperate father Jairus, "Do not fear, only believe." And, frankly, Jesus, this is not easy for us to hear, as we face *our* loss and pain. And, believe me, we could easily slip from sorrow right into bitterness and hardened hearts.

But we haven't, you haven't. Baby Sara's family hasn't. And as we pick our way through this gospel story and then our own stories, the ones without the so-called happy endings, somehow we see that we *do* find healing—maybe not in the places and in the ways we had hoped for or expected, but we do find healing. Theologian John Pilch defines healing as the “restoration of meaning to people's lives.” The restoration of meaning to people's lives, despite what happens physically.

This past week I attended a gathering of a small group of people, professionals and community members, whose work is dedicated to healing and recovery from mental illness. As it happened, it was my first visit, and I fell into a farewell party for one of its members. One of the gifts he received was a small handmade stained glass plaque of a sailboat with a colorful sun in the corner. It was made by a woman in the group and it was passed around so that all present could admire it. I held it briefly, murmured a brief compliment and passed it on to the next person. The woman who created it leaned across the table to me to explain the significance of the gift. “See,” she said, “I used to be a self-injurer, so my creating something out of glass instead of cutting myself with it is really something!” Healing ... restored meaning.

Every year Doug and I receive an invitation to an annual road race in Massachusetts to benefit research for autism. It is enthusiastically organized by our two friends whose autistic son drowned in their family pool several years ago. Healing through restored meaning.

A sign advertising the Relay for Life road race for cancer sits on the lawn outside the house of a daughter whose Dad passed away this year from cancer. She is healing through restored meaning.

Following the death of Neda this week, thousands of Iranians have found new resolve, restored meaning in their lives, a new symbol for their struggle within the shocking loss of their comrade.

Scholarship funds, musical tributes, writing memoirs, assembling photographs—all restoring meaning in people's lives, all healing practices after deep loss.

Jesus says, “Little girl, get up” and somehow we all do. We get up from the dark bedside, from the chair as we put down the telephone, and we manage to put one foot in front of the other. We begin to draw upon our faith, albeit in a different way. We take a *second* look at Jesus' words—do not fear, only believe—and, lo and behold, our faith does begin to make us well. Because we can go beyond these short-sighted miracle gospel stories of storm stopping and blood flowing and remember the ultimate miracle of Jesus' death and then his resurrection and his promise to us to take us with him. And then we remember where our daughters and sons are, and our sisters and brothers, and husbands and wives, and mothers and fathers, and indeed, Jesus was right, they are but sleeping, sleeping in the embrace of God, and still very much alive in our hearts.

Baby twin Sara's mother, Cheryl, within hours of Sara's passing away this week made this entry on the website where postings of the twins' progress have been available for these past several weeks. “We are so thankful to Sara for teaching us and so many people about being strong, about making a valiant effort, about living in the moment and about the things that really matter ... Please invite those you love who have passed away to greet Sara and take care of her for us until we can see her again.”

Cheryl's amazing faith not only makes her well; it makes us well. We are healed, meaning is restored to our lives, each time we encounter faith such as this, which reveals to us a deep awareness of the continuing presence of God, an acceptance of that which we cannot understand, a deep peace in the belief that all *will* be well despite the pain of today. May we aspire to that faith, the faith that can drive us to cling to the hem of Jesus' cloak and know that even if the bleeding does not stop, we *will* be healed and all *will* be well. Amen.