

***The Following Christ***  
Mark 5:21-43  
Sermon by Mark Schloneger  
June 27, 2021

Numbers 19:11 (NIV).

*Whoever touches a human corpse will be unclean for seven days.*

Leviticus 21:10-11 (NIV).

*The high priest, the one among his brothers who has had the anointing oil poured on his head and who has been ordained to wear the priestly garments . . . he must not enter a place where there is a dead body.*

Leviticus 15:25, 26, 31 (NIV).

*When a woman has a discharge of blood for many days at a time other than her monthly period, she will be unclean as long as she has the discharge . . . Anyone who touches them will be unclean; they must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening. The Israelites must be separate from things that make them unclean, so they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my dwelling place, which is among them.*

Mark 5:21-43 (NIV).

*When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. He pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." So Jesus went with him.*

*A large crowd followed and pressed around him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.*

*At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"*

*"You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?' "*

*But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."*

*While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher anymore?"*

*Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, "Don't be afraid; just believe."*

*He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him.*

*After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum!" (which means "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"). Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat. (Mark 5:21-43, NIV)*

It has been almost twenty years since I've seen a little girl named Dianora.

I think about her, though.

In my mind, Dianora will always be a baby.

Her grandmother, Alicia, cradled her in her arms

when she knocked on the door of our house when we lived in Mozambique.

She was looking for my wife, Sarah.

Dianora's mother had died shortly after giving birth.

We didn't know her, and we didn't know how she died.

It could have been HIV/AIDS, complications during the delivery, malaria.

It could have been anything, really.

Dianora's grandmother Alicia found it difficult to care for a baby at her age,

but she did the best that she could with what little she had.

She conscientiously brought Dianora to the Special Attention Clinic for at-risk babies.

That's how she got to know Sarah.

Dianora's full name is Dianora Alberto.

In Mozambique and in many other places around the world,

it is tradition to have your father's name as your last name.

And so when Alicia needed to travel for a few weeks,

she left her granddaughter in Alberto's care.

But Alberto was an alcoholic.

He was not an attentive father.

When Alicia returned home from her trip,

she found Dianora too weak to eat,

too weak even to cry.

That's when Alicia came knocking on our door, desperate.

Dianora weighed seven pounds, six ounces.

She was ten months old.

And I was filled with deep sadness and deep anger.

Those two emotions are siblings, I think.

I was angry at Alberto.

I was angry at Alicia for leaving Dianora with Alberto.

I was angry at Mozambique's government,

where corruption and mismanagement squander away money

that could provide some social services, a safety net.

I was angry at a world where only certain diseases in certain locations

are allowed to spread unfettered,  
where access to adequate medical care  
depends on where you happen to be born and to whom,  
where poverty seems to be both an unstoppable force and an immovable object,  
where Dianora's legacy would be in nameless infant mortality statistics  
confirming what many people in wealthy countries  
already think about Africa and places like it:  
*that life there is worth less.*

But this child -- this child that seemed destined to be forgotten,  
had a name that I didn't want to forget.  
Later that week, I wrote these words:

*Yesterday's sigh  
is named Dianora Alberto,  
clinging to life  
like a forgetting tragedy.*

*A shiver  
and a twitch, you are  
barely enough  
to barely remember.*

*Who sees you, Dianora?*

This isn't the first time you've heard me tell a story  
that comes from when we lived in Mozambique.

I'm sure it won't be the last.

I'm always conscious about how much I share from that time,  
and I've sometimes wondered why so many of the connections I make to scripture  
come from those three and half years.

I think it's because that's the first time when I was forced to confront  
two things which were so much easier for me  
to avoid or to keep hidden in the United States --  
the face of deep human suffering,  
and my weakness to do anything about it.

I still have those tendencies, and I don't think I'm alone in that.

In fact, those who've experienced chronic long-term illnesses  
will tell you that I'm not alone in that,  
either in the wider church or in this congregation.

They will tell you that people are there in a crisis, in the short term,  
but they tend to look away, to avoid,  
or even to grow impatient with people  
with conditions that require prolonged medical intervention.  
People also forget about the caregivers.

Why is that?

Maybe it's because people who are suffering make us feel inadequate.

What should we do, what should we say, to provide comfort, relief?

Maybe they remind us of our own fragility, our own vulnerability.  
We fear that "they" could be "us."

Maybe they cause us to ask questions about God  
that we think raise questions about our faith.  
If I fervently pray to God for healing,  
well, what if the healing that I want God to make happen doesn't happen?  
What does that say about God? About me?

Whatever our reasons, the result is the same:  
we hide from one another and from God;  
we move apart from one another and from God;  
we fail to see, to be, the resurrected body of Christ,  
still bearing the open wounds from his crucifixion.

*Who sees you, Dianora?*

When Jairus came up to Jesus,  
he did so as one with every social advantage --  
he was a man,  
he was a leader of the synagogue,  
and, put together, those two things meant that he was likely a man of means.  
Yet, before Jesus, he took his place among the desperate:  
his daughter was near death,  
and he fell before Jesus' feet,  
pleading for him to come to his house to save her life.

So Jesus followed him there,  
and the large, excited crowd followed, too, pressing in as they went.

Normally, when we talk about following Jesus,  
we are referring to our responsibility to follow Jesus.

But another way of looking at "following Jesus" can refer to Jesus as the follower --  
the following Jesus,  
God following us to our desperate places, our weakest spaces,  
and there, by his presence, fulfilling the words of Psalm 139:

*Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.  
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.  
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me  
and the light become night around me,"  
even the darkness will not be dark to you;  
the night will shine like the day,  
for darkness is as light to you. (Psalm 139:7-12, NIV).*

Darkness is as light to you.

Jesus does not avoid the darkness,  
and that includes whatever darkness any of you are experiencing right now.

The disciples who were with Jesus  
must have been excited that a synagogue leader  
came up to him pleading for help.  
After all, Jesus' relationship with the religious elites  
had not, shall we say, gone well,  
and here was an opportunity to win some favor.  
If, that is, Jesus could get to the house on time to save the girl.  
And so, they must have been anxious,  
when Jesus stopped in the midst of this hurried procession  
and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"

I can hear frustration in the disciples' response, can't you?  
"You see the crowd pressing in on you.  
How can you say 'Who touched me?'  
In other words, "Who touched you? Who touched you?  
Gobs o' people, Jesus! Let's go."

*Who sees you, Dianora?*

Unlike Jairus, who had the confidence to come to Jesus  
and speak directly to him,  
the woman who had touched Jesus had hoped to fade away.  
She must have been elated that she had been healed,  
but she still sought invisibility:  
her physical condition was gone,  
but her shame ran deep.

This woman, trembling with fear,  
fell before Jesus,  
and told him the whole truth:  
the years and years that she had been bleeding,  
doctor after doctor that she had visited,  
treatment after treatment that she had endured  
symptom after symptom that she had experienced,  
and bill after bill that she had paid to the point of bankruptcy.<sup>1</sup>

Her story is no different from those many of you know so well --  
either because you've experienced it personally,  
or because it's been the experience of someone you love.  
You know the desperation, the willingness to do anything for healing.

And Jesus listened. And Jesus listens.  
This woman approached Jesus in posture of shame --  
she had thought that she had stolen a healing,  
but Jesus said, "My daughter, your faith has made you well,  
go in peace, be healed of your disease."

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<sup>1</sup> Erin Dufault-Hunter, "Human Flourishing and Chronic Suffering in the Body of Christ: The Aching Beauty of Vulnerable Communion," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 37:1 (Winter 2019), 18.

This is what healing looks like.

Those severed from others, feeling alone in their shame,  
are seen by Jesus, given his attention, and blessed with peace and healing.

Normally, we think we like to think that  
the pure becomes impure when it touches anything that is impure,  
that the healthy become sick when they associate with the sick.  
that the righteous become sinful when they associate with the sinful.

In Jesus, it's the reverse.

The impure become pure,  
the sick are made well,  
the sinful become righteous.  
and the shamed become welcomed into community.

Healing in Christian tradition not merely physical –  
it is never equated with curing disease –  
our ultimate healing will only brought about through the portal of death;  
yet, in this life, in this life, we seek to be healed as fully as we can possibly be –  
spirit, soul, and heart.

And that is why we can never turn our backs on each other --  
either in our health or in our suffering.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus goes on from there to Jairus' home,  
and he raises his daughter to life,

But let's not treat this desperate woman as an interlude to the important healing.  
As disciples, let's resist the magnetic pull of anxiety (to be significant, to fix, to matter)  
and come to know that God cares for each of us  
but puts the weak, the suffering, and the outcast at the head of the line?

Let's not enact enacting the faithless, fearful tyranny of the urgent  
instead of gentle patience of reign of Christ?

*Who sees you, Dianora?*

In the name of Jesus, the work of the church is to see those who no one else sees.

To welcome those who no one else welcomes.

Though we at times might feel anxious, let us not lose our focus.

We give and share love in community.

It's not as if people who experience Chronic illnesses  
are simply recipients of the church's care --  
it's that they are a part of the body of Christ,  
whose wounds we all bear,  
in communion with each other and God.

Let us, as a community of faith, take our place  
among the vulnerable ones, the invisible ones,  
the powerless ones, the ones who find life only by welcoming Jesus into their lives.

*Who sees you, Dianora?*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 20.

Grandma Alicia saw her.

For weeks, Alicia stayed with her at the hospital, 24/7,  
until Dianora gained enough strength to be released for home.

Then, for weeks after that, Alicia carried her on her back  
and walked to the Special Attention Clinic with tired legs in the hot sun.

Carla saw Dianora.

Carla was a nurse at the clinic who had just given birth to her own child.  
She sometimes dealt harshly with patients.

Yet, for months, Carla took Dianora to her breast  
and nursed another mother's baby to health.

Right before we left Mozambique,  
I saw Dianora.

I saw her as a growing and happy girl.  
And I saw Alicia and Carla as disciples of Jesus.  
I changed the ending to those words that I had written before:

*Yesterday's sigh  
is named Dianora Alberto,  
clinging to life  
like a forgetting tragedy.*

*A shiver and  
a twitch, you are  
barely enough  
to barely remember.*

*"I see you,  
Dianora," says Jesus,  
in swaddling clothes and  
lying in a manger.*

Amen.