

### **Mark 5:21-43 “Breaking Boundaries”**

Well, the churches have been getting some attention from the media recently, haven't they? I noticed that there were even some pictures and articles in the weekend papers. One item featured Pat Robertson, renowned conservative Baptist preacher in the States, along with Rowan Williams the Archbishop of Canterbury and a Roman Catholic priest from their new 'stud' calendar although the accompanying article was about how the Pope has issued a proclamation doing away with contemporary (read 'guitar and drums') music in worship. The vote in this little sampling of media attention seemed to be two-against-one, at least in the sense that both the Baptist and the Roman Catholic positions were quite conservative, especially set against the highlighting of the developing split in the Anglican Communion over the ordination of gays, or at least the consecration of a gay bishop. The outcry in the Anglican church seems to be that a boundary has been crossed that should not have been crossed.

The church at large has a stellar record of setting stiff and rigid boundaries, and proclaiming that at the very least God would be offended by, and certainly the church would be offended by those boundaries being crossed. Sometimes the boundaries seem a bit nonsensical, especially when the rules have been relaxed or eliminated and we look back. Take for example the 'rule' that a woman was not welcome in worship without a hat – a rule that in some cultures and places still exists, even in Canada.

Somewhat more serious rules, lines, boundaries were also in place, however. For example, this year The Presbyterian Church in Canada celebrates the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of women. Up until 1966 women were supposed to "know their place", and their place definitely did NOT include the pulpits of our denomination. Since that boundary was removed, many women have been ordained as Ministers of Word and Sacrament, although I was reminded at General Assembly that there are still some congregations who would not think of calling a woman minister – indeed there are still some congregations who refuse to elect and ordain women as elders. (It should be noted that such congregations are gradually becoming fewer and fewer, because those who stay rigidly locked in such attitudes are dying off.)

It was, however, only fourteen years ago that a woman was elected Moderator of a General Assembly. I had the privilege of being a Commissioner to the 118<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in 1992, at which the Rev. Linda Bell was installed as the first woman Moderator. I was also a Commissioner this year and Linda spoke about her experience as Moderator, and I was astounded to learn that in 1992 she performed her task under the pressure of a serious death threat. Yes, Virginia, even Canadian Presbyterians can be raised to such levels of passion – would that they could be for more gospel-like activities! The irony, of course, is that I'm sure the person who issued the death threat would have argued strenuously that his (or her, I suppose) motives were motivated by scripture.

I don't understand how people can hold such positions about scripture when confronted with the realities of scripture that we see in passages such as the one we just read in Mark's gospel, a passage that shouts out about Jesus breaking traditional boundaries with the power and blessing of God.

The story, well two stories really, is framed in Mark's typical style of a "story-within-a-story", where one story is interrupted and another inserted. In this case the 'outer' story is the healing of Jairus' daughter, and the 'inner' story is the healing of the woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. The stories are connected not only by the place they occurred, but also by several key themes. The first key theme, and I cannot stress this enough, is that of healing in a situation where all of the religious rules said God wouldn't even have been present, because Jesus was unclean.

I'm not sure how to help you understand the impact of that word, 'unclean'. We tend to say it as though we're describing the sidewalk outside or like a messy house, when the meaning in Jesus' day was infinitely greater, for in religious terms any contact with someone who was unclean meant the loss of one's ability to communicate with God, even to lose one's hope of salvation. The faith in which Jesus was raised and preached believed with all its heart that one who had violated the rules, who had stepped outside of the boundaries of righteousness, would offend God so intensely that God would somehow put his fingers in his ears and not even listen. To give you some feel for how the average devout Jew in Jesus' day would feel about being near, let alone touching, someone who was unclean perhaps you can image how you'd feel about shaking my hand on the way out from today's service having heard that I have the worst case of mutated human-to-human communicable version of the bird flu. I don't, but imagine how you'd avoid even coming near me, never mind shaking my hand!

And it was no secret that Jesus was 'unclean'. He'd just returned from the Gentile shore, where he'd been in contact with a group of pig farmers who were upset about the loss of their livestock in the process of healing the demoniac of Gerasene. Jesus had been in contact not just with Gentiles, but with pig farmers, and thus could not even enter the synagogue to worship. It's a wonder that anyone came near him, let alone a "great crowd". But they didn't stay away – they came in droves. They gathered around him on the seashore, in noisy, pushy, shoving, chaotic crowds, everyone trying to get closer, to hear, to see this man of god. As we hear from the disciples, many of the crowd even got shoved into him.

That's why Jairus' approach to Jesus was all the more astounding. As a leader in the synagogue, Jairus knew all too clearly the consequences for him of even talking to this man. The rules were clear, the boundaries that could not be crossed were drawn boldly by the laws of Moses, and Jairus knew the penalties by heart, and yet he came, begging Jesus to heal his little girl.

The same was true for the woman with the hemorrhaging problem. For her the risks seemed in some ways less, because she was already banned from worship, and had been for twelve years. But it seemed like she had little to lose, because her status had dropped about as far as it could go, and she knew the crowd wouldn't hesitate to condemn and even kill her with impunity if they discovered her in their midst, doing what she so desperately wanted to do – touch even the hem of his cloak that she might be healed. However, nothing else had worked: she had tried all of the medical experts and now she was destitute, broke and still not healed. This strange man was her last hope. He needn't even know that she had crossed the uncrossable boundary if she could only sneak up from behind.

These two, Jairus and the unnamed woman, people from the extreme opposite ends of the spectrum of acceptability, were forced in seeking help to cross legal and religious boundaries that were clearly drawn, and rigidly enforced. Boundaries handed down in the Law and the Prophets, boundaries that were vigorously and rigidly defended as being scriptural, as being the inflexible and unchanging law of God.

Thank God for his Son, Jesus Christ, who not only respected, acknowledged and accepted those who crossed these boundaries, but who also moved those boundaries, and who continues moving the boundaries even today! Thank God that Jesus not only listened to Jairus' plea for help, and instead of banning him for crossing the boundary responded to his plea, and healed his daughter. Thanks be to God that Jesus himself crossed the boundary by going not only into the house where the girl had died, not only did he enter the room where the corpse lay (which in Leviticus was banned for a priest even if the deceased was the father or mother of the priest!), but he crossed the ultimate boundary by touching the corpse. He took the girl's hand, and spoke to her, saying "get up", and she did. Who could deny that his power to heal her was from God? Nobody! Who would dare deny that Jesus, in responding to

Jairus' crossing the boundary himself crossed the ultimate boundary, and yet still found favour from God to heal her? Nobody!

Jesus had undeniably crossed a legal and religious boundary simply by being in Gentile territory, never mind being among pig farmers, yet his power to heal the man possessed by demons was undiminished. Jairus crossed the same boundary by approaching Jesus to heal his daughter, and instead of being shunned by Jesus, Jesus turned and broke through the boundary to heal the daughter.

And what about the woman who touched the hem of his cloak? Instead of simply dismissing her subtle touch as merely one more shove, push or jostle in the crowd, Jesus recognized what had happened, and sought the woman out, not to condemn her, not to incite the crowd to drive her back over the boundary into lonely, sick isolation, but to comfort her. Even though she had by all legal accounting violated him through touching his clothing, even though she had crossed just about every religious boundary drawn, Jesus broke that boundary by softly calling her to him, affirming her faith, confirming her healing and sending her on her way with his blessing of peace.

Perhaps it is time for the church to reassess the boundaries that have been built over the years, and even to echo that famous quote from Ronald Reagan, "tear down these walls!" In the shining light of this scriptural example of God's power so clearly at work in Jesus healing those who had crossed perceived boundaries of righteousness, perhaps we can see how Jesus has broken those boundaries, that in Christ all have unfettered access to God, to reconciliation with God, to peace with God. Perhaps it is time for us to reassess those boundaries that we have either inherited or have created ourselves, pretending to limit not only others' access to God but our own. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge that Christ has broken the boundaries, and has let us in.