

# **It's An Honor, Not a Bother**

June 27, 2021

## **Radical Inclusion**

The conversation is etched into my brain. It must have been about a decade ago. Marriage equality was not yet the law of the land.

The phone was ringing as I let myself into the darkened church office. (This was at my previous church.) The administrative assistant had the day off, my co-pastor liked to work at a neighborhood coffee shop, so I was alone. I let the phone ring on the admin's desk, but then my extension started to ring. I hadn't even gotten my coat off yet, so was a little harried as I grabbed the receiver.

"This is Bridget, how may I help you?"

I tried to project cheerfulness and professionalism, rather than frustration with having had to park four blocks away. The woman on the other end of the line spoke in a rush, "I don't know if you can help me. My fiancé and I don't belong to your church, but I've called more than a dozen already and no one will marry us, and I'm just wondering if there's any way you'd consider doing it."

Now, the church that I served in Milwaukee didn't have a wedding policy, per se. Beyond member weddings, they left it up to the pastors' discretion. If a pastor had the time and wanted to celebrate a marriage, it was their call.

The church DID have a hefty fee for using the building, though.

As I told the caller, I'd be honored to meet with her and her fiancé, to talk about marriage and what a Christian wedding is, to see if we'd be a good fit for one another, she interrupted me.

"There's one problem, my fiancé is a trans man."

When I said, "That, my dear, is not a problem," I first heard a whoosh of air out of her lungs, and then she burst into tears.

"Really? We could really get married in your church?" she managed to say through her sobbing.

"You'll need to go through the same premarital counseling that I do with all couples, and sometimes I refer couples to outside counseling, but as long as I'm comfortable that you two are a blessing in each other's lives, it would be an honor to officiate."

Not only did the premarital counseling go swimmingly, I'm happy to report that as far as I know, the marriage is strong and enduring.

The couple never did end up joining the church, which is always a pastor's secret hope when they celebrate a wedding for non-members, but there is no question that they and

their 200 guests experienced a church in which who they are was not a problem, and that their love was something to celebrate. In that, my prayer is that grace and healing abound!

### **Gospel**

As we approach the anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising tomorrow and this year's PRIDE month comes to a close, the themes that I hear in our Gospel lesson today are belonging and worthiness. In our passage from the Gospel according to Mark, we hear of two people being healed. First, one of the leaders of the synagogue, Jairus, comes to Jesus, telling him that his 12-year-old daughter is ill, and asking Jesus to heal her.

Sandwiched in between the healing of the little girl is a story of a woman who has been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years who touches Jesus' cloak, Jesus feels power flow out of himself, and the woman is healed. The woman has been bent over for as long as the little girl has been alive. Furthermore, because her condition is a flow of blood, we know two more things: she is exhausted and most likely anemic, and she has been considered ritually unclean.

For twelve whole years she has been ostracized. She's been drained financially, and if I know anything about human nature, she's been drawn to doctors and healing methods that are less and less reputable as her desperation and exile have gone on. When she touches Jesus' cloak, Jesus feels power flow through himself, and she is healed. Instead of punishing her, Jesus says, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." Be healed of your dis-ease. Jesus calls her daughter! Says that she belongs, not just to the community, but in HIS family!

Candace Simpson of Concord Baptist Church of Christ in Brooklyn sees this as "an instruction to the community and to this woman: family is whoever takes care of you." It's like the memes we see so often during PRIDE month, "If your family have disowned you because of who you are, I'll be your mom. Now drink some water and take your meds. I love you." She belongs; she's his beloved daughter.

Back to the story of Jairus' daughter, the "bread" of this story sandwich. Some portray the interlude with the woman with the hemorrhage as an interruption, but Jesus' words and behavior do nothing to substantiate that. Instead, the second thing I'd like you to take away from this passage is that taking care of people isn't an interruption; it isn't for Jesus, and my hope is that each of us can find a place of psycho-spiritual rootedness that caring for the real people who cross our paths isn't a disruption for us, either.

Furthermore, I often hear from people that they've been taught not to bring their needs to God, that this is somehow selfish or self serving. To those of you who were taught that lesson, I lift up this passage as a counterpoint. One person asks for healing for a family member, another person takes it for herself, and both are healed.

Sharing our needs with God is not selfish or egotistical, but rather forges an honest relationship with the divine. Remember that Jesus tells us to "Love the Lord God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our strength, and to love our neighbor\_\_\_\_." What's the last part of the phrase? "As ourself." To invite God into our needs and our

healing is not only reasonable, it is critical to developing a healthy, honest relationship with God.

When we get back to the story of Jairus and his daughter, “some people came from the leader’s house to say, ‘Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?’” In hearing, “Why trouble the teacher any further?” I imagine that Jairus is now not only actively mourning his daughter, he’s feeling like he’s a burden to Jesus, that healing his daughter is a lost cause. But those of us who’ve read the whole story know that bringing Jesus to his home indeed was not a lost cause.

Jesus says, “she is not dead, but only sleeping.”

For much of my life, I read this passage as telling us that Jesus, somehow, either by his words, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!” or by his prayer, or some other action, Jesus brings her back to life. But when we read this as a story about worthiness, What if the girl was never dead in the first place, and Jesus is the only one who recognizes that?

“If she was never dead in the first place, then the onus is on the community to reflect. Why did we think she was beyond help? What about her suggested that she was not worth ‘troubling the teacher?’ We are then likely to see Jesus as the one who can find life where it has been disregarded.” (Candace Simpson)

Candace Simpson suggests that the call of this passage then becomes asking ourselves who are the people, both individuals and groups, that we have considered not worth the trouble? She asks us to pray about how we discern that someone is beyond help? When is someone out of chances?

## **Conclusion**

I framed this reflection today through a PRIDE lens, but Jesus’ witness to belonging and worthiness is universal. Harriet McBryde Johnson was a disability rights activist who said, “The peculiar drama of my life has placed me in a world that by and large thinks it would be better if people like me did not exist. My fight has been for accommodation, the world to me and me to the world.”

Jesus’ witness in this passage is that an unclean woman and a mere girl are worthy and belong, but that worthiness extrapolates. People with disabilities are worthy and belong. Formerly incarcerated people are worthy and belong. People with addictions are worthy and belong.

When we personally or the voices in our society write off individuals or whole groups, Jesus is there to call them daughter, to say, “you’re not dead yet,” I still see life within you. And being a part of your healing and return to community and family is not an intrusion, is not trouble. As I said to the prospective bride who was fearful to tell me that her fiancé was trans, “It’s an honor, not a bother.”

It's an honor, not a bother to be a part of helping someone know that the God of love and life sees them as a beloved daughter, a beloved son, no matter "the way things have always been done," or "the way we usually handle these sort of people." It's an honor, not a bother to be a part of someone's experience of the vast, extravagant, prodigal nature of God's love rather than the miserly, scarcity focused nature of human exclusion. It's an honor, not a bother to lend our energy to someone's experience of belonging and worthiness. It's an honor, not a bother to, as our passage from the Second Letter to the Corinthians lifts up, practice generosity, not only monetarily, but also in inclusion, healing and love.

As PRIDE month draws to a close, my prayer for all of us this week is that we will find ways to be agents of God's inclusion by spreading messages of worthiness and belonging. And in doing so, that we'll all be able to say, "Daughter/Son, your faith has made you well; be at peace, and be healed of your dis-ease."

May it be so. Alleluia, and Amen!

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**2 Corinthians 8:7-15, Mark 5:21-43**  
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