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The Family of God

Mark 5:27

In the world in which we live there is no shortage of reminders about the brokenness of humanity. In June of 2005 Barbara and I spent a week in the French region of Saintonge. We stayed in the town of Saintes in a place that the British would call a self-catering accommodation. This was a garage apartment with cooking facilities. The owners lived in the main house and were always around tending their magnificent gardens. Monsieur and Madame Musseau were very hospitable and were frequently checking on us to see how we were doing. The only problem was that they did not speak any English and had absolutely no desire to try to communicate in English. But they had a lot to say to us. They just kept repeating key words in French until we finally got it or guessed right. We knew that we had to figure out what they were saying because they wouldn't give up until we did.

One evening they invited us into their home for what they called an "aperitif". What they called an aperitif was for us a fairly substantial meal. They served cheese and crackers with a locally produced wine. Then they followed with three kinds of fruit and a huge serving of pizza. We were well into the pizza course when the conversation turned to where we lived. They had assumed that we were British since most of their guests were British. When they realized that we were Americans it was as if we had been transformed before their eyes. Madame Musseau threw her arms in the air and said "le premier Americains!" We were the first Americans to stay in their cottage. What happened next was really bizarre. Once they realized that we were not British they almost immediately began bad-mouthing the British. Those words they did not have to repeat. We understood immediately what they were saying. At that moment we realized that the ancient walls of hostility that have separated the French and the British for so many centuries are still in place.

In the 5th chapter of Luke's gospel we find Jesus confronting the walls that separate human beings. Here Jesus encounters two very different people who have a desperate need for healing. They live in the same village but are totally isolated from one another. Jairus is a prominent religious leader whose daughter is very ill. She is at the point of death and the doctors have told him that there is no hope. That he would come to Jesus at all is an indication of his sense of desperation. For Jesus is not held in high regard among Jairus' friends and colleagues. Most of them consider Jesus to be a dangerous influence. Jesus agrees to help and he sets out for the home of Jairus.

Before Jesus can complete this mission he is interrupted by another person who has reached the point of desperation. There is in the crowd a woman who has suffered from illness for twelve years. She had spent everything she had going from one physician to the next in search of a cure. But her condition continued to grow worse. She is not like Jairus. She has no status in the community. Because of her condition she is branded as unclean. She does not have the privilege of social interaction within the community. She cannot be admitted to the synagogue where Jairus is an official. Perhaps, the most telling indication of her situation in this passage is that she is not described by name. And so, it is not surprising that she lacks the confidence to ask Jesus directly for his help. She seeks an anonymous

healing. She approaches Jesus from behind reaching through the crowd to touch his cloak. Suddenly she receives the wholeness that no physician could give her.

But Jesus is not satisfied with an anonymous healing. He stops and demands to be told who touched his clothing. Jesus' insistence on knowing the identity of this nameless woman was for her a powerful word of grace. He is telling her that her identity is not determined by the external factors of her life. Jesus cares only about her need.

The nature of Jesus' approach to this woman is suggested by Neil Glickman's description of a funeral for a deaf man. He writes:

During the eulogy, the preacher remarked that this man was now in Heaven with his Lord and he was now "communicating with his hands in his pockets." He no longer needs to sign, the preacher continued. He can now speak. He can now hear. He is now healed. The preacher's bias was caught by an astute deaf woman who wondered why he assumed that deaf people go to Heaven and learn speech, but not that hearing people go to Heaven and learn to sign. "Does he think that when French people die, they go to Heaven and learn English?" she asked, annoyed also by his assumption that deaf people are defective and that when they die they are "healed" and become hearing people (*Journal for Preachers, Pentecost 2005, page 26*).

The deaf woman was sensitive to the way in which the larger community saw her as deficient because of the external factors of her life. Jesus does not judge people in that way in this passage. He understands that he is speaking to a woman who suffers as much from the rejection of her community as from her disease.

Jesus' healing ministry includes the healing of communities. The brokenness of this community is revealed through the comparison between the prominent synagogue official and the nameless woman. Jairus represents those who have power in that society. The woman represents those who are marginalized and powerless. Both come to Jesus because they have run out of options. Before Jesus they stand on the common ground of their fragile humanity. But in their community they are separated by a barrier that cannot be breached.

When Jesus interrupts his journey to Jairus' home to seek out the nameless woman, he extends healing to this community. He is affirming all who are excluded from its resources. It would not have gone unnoticed that the delay created by Jesus' insistence on speaking to the nameless woman may well have contributed to the death of Jairus' little girl. Everyone can see that Jesus is not guided by the priorities that have always governed that community. The ruling elite no longer come first. Something new is at work here. Jesus has a different vision of what a community can be. Jesus is saying that in this community everyone has a name. In this community no one is excluded. In this community everyone is part of the family of God.

In the 8th chapter of 2 Corinthians Paul invites his readers to enlarge their understanding of the family of God. Paul is challenging the Greeks in Corinth to give money to help Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who are suffering because of the destruction of that city by the Romans. He bases his appeal on a fundamentally different understanding of how Jews and Gentiles relate to one another. No longer are they to see each other as competitors. No longer are they to see the other as a threat. Now they exist to help each other. When a Jewish community suffers a disaster, the Gentile Christians can help. When a Gentile community suffers a setback their Jewish brothers and sisters can help. In Jesus Christ their relationship has been transformed. The ancient walls have come down. Paul envisions a safety net far larger than anyone has previously imagined. It is the net that connects all of us to the family of God.

This is the kind of vision that was at the heart of the movement that created our nation in 1776. It was the idea that people need not be separated by the walls which divided one American colony from another. That they could come together in a common pursuit of justice.

The message of the gospel invites us to continue that process. Because we all belong to the family of God we can live as if the ancient walls have already come do