

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 13 Year B 2024

For most of my 20s, I lived and worked in a Christian community in Hobart for people with disability. In our communities - scattered throughout the world - we welcomed people with intellectual disabilities and shared life and created home with them. One of the people in our community was Tim. He was quite short, had Downs Syndrome, and was unable to talk verbally. Now many people would be unsure about engaging Tim in conversation. But Tim had no trouble in speaking, really. He just used his hands instead of his mouth. If Tim wanted to communicate something, his hands did the talking. I am sure all of you at various times have looked on in amazement when those who are deaf communicate through sign language.

Our hands really are amazing things. We take them for granted, to be sure. Not only do they work hard for us but they are also capable of *communicating* an incredible amount. Consider Michelangelo's famous painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel depicting the creation of Adam: Adam stretching out his arm to touch the finger of God – giving expression to the highest endeavours, the greatest aspirations of humankind. Think also of hands joined in prayer, the handshake, the warm, hearty slap on the back, the nurse who wipes the brow of her patient, the grandmother who wraps her hands in tenderness around her grandchild's face. Think then, too, what else our hands can communicate: the firm slap around a face, a drunken punch. A pointed finger to sternly correct, another finger raised angrily in traffic.... Or for anyone who has travelled to the third world has seen, small children with a raised open hand begging for money or food. Our hands are capable of expressing our greatest aspirations and tenderness, and also our deepest despair and needs.

When we look to Jesus we see One who welcomes the children into his embrace, who takes bread and wine into his hands, and stretches out his arms on the cross between heaven and earth: hands that communicate so much. In the Gospel we encounter today we hear two tales of reaching out, of transformative, life-giving touch. A woman who reaches out - touches - in faith and the Jesus who reaches out, touches, to give life.

Now, the lectionary gives us the choice to hear today only the healing of Jairus's daughter (which would be shame). But today we hear the full story, the stories of both the healing of the women and the raising of Jairus' daughter. They belong together. They are placed side by side for contrast and comparison and to highlight and emphasize the themes and ideas in the other.

Now, last week we heard the account of Jesus calming the sea. In that story, Jesus chides the disciples for having '*no faith*'. Here, then, is a striking contrast as we hear two stories of *unlikely* faith: one from a social outcast because of her illness and the other from one who stands *against* his social group. Jairus, the synagogue official, represents a group who have *rejected* Jesus, which makes his request both strange and bold. But both stories are of people who recognise God's presence in the work and action of Jesus, while the disciples up until now have failed to. And while our focus might be on the drama of raising a girl to life, *both* stories are in fact about restoring life. While one concerns physical death the other, if you like, concerns a living death.

For a culture obsessed by blood and purity, a haemorrhaging woman was declared unclean. What's more, she had had her life drained out from her which is surely the point about her so-called treatment that has left her worse off. Doctors have drained her of her resources, bled her dry so to speak. A point only emphasised by the length of time she has suffered the ailment: her life is literally draining away. From this place of desperation, she sees in Jesus One who will, perhaps, bring her to life again. And so, using the crowd as a cloak, she reaches out. It is the touch of faith. Just as surely we can detect the difference between a slap on the back and a slap around the face, so Jesus can notice the difference between the touch of the jostling crowd, and the touch of hope from the broken woman. And indeed she is made well, healed, as Jesus says, by her faith. The miracle sees her restored to health, yes, but also in restored to the life of the community. In community is found wholeness. Jesus calls her 'daughter'. She once more has a family, a community, a safe place to belong. Her isolation and alienation is ended.

The unnamed woman defied her society's demands to keep distant, to not touch. And Jesus defies it when we turn to the next story – the raising of Jairus's daughter – when he touches the girl, taking her by the hand. To touch a corpse was also to make one unclean. But again, the touch of faith does not defile or contaminate, but brings life. As the woman's 12 years of suffering has given way to life, so now the 12-year-old girl, on the edge of marriage, can hope for life.

But this life is only possible by faith, by *expelling* the devil's 'partners' in death as the reading from Wisdom reminds us. The *expulsion* of the unclean spirits - the principal foes against Jesus' mission - is a distinct feature of this Gospel. But just as unclean spirits are expelled, so Jesus expels the uncleanness from the woman. And he expels the doubters and unbelievers from the little girl's bedroom leaving only the parents and Jesus' closest friends. These forces – demonic, illness, doubt - *must be sent out*, expelled, because they are *life denying*. They must be challenged, defied. The woman has defied them. Jairus has defied them. And Jesus defied them: *the child is not dead, but asleep*.

The forces that deny life in the various ways it is presented to us today show us how it is isolating and alienating. For both the woman and the girl, full life - 'God-life' - is something that restores us to community, to family, to relationship, to communion. There is much that will seek to prevent us from living life, the 'God' life; much that will keep us alone and in our graves.

Now, there can be a temptation in the life of faith to think that we can only extend the hand of friendship, we can only offer welcome and acceptance. There is a certain strand of Christianity that argues for no barriers, that the only appropriate gesture is one of open embrace. And of course, we should seek to extend friendship and welcome. We can reach out to Christ in faith and hope, and he will not refuse anyone. But as the gospel today highlights, turning to him in faith means that some things need to be expelled, excluded. Light and life cannot accommodate darkness and death. There is the hand that invites but also the hand that repels. It is only when we discern the difference that our welcome can be authentic. Only when we live with that tension can Christ's touch bring true life. Amen.