

**Fifth Sunday After Pentecost  
June 27, 2021  
The Rev. Elizabeth W. Colton**

The shape of today's stories form a sandwich. Here's the first slice of bread: Jesus is approached by Jairus, the temple leader, to ask him if he would come to see his little daughter, who is at the point of death. Jesus went with him. But on the way, and here is the sandwich filling: another story develops, with the woman who touched Jesus' clothes. Jesus stops to find out who it was that touched him and the disciples tell him. The woman falls at his feet. And here is the second slice of bread: Jesus is told that Jairus' little daughter has died. He goes on to Jairus' house, where the dead girl is raised to life. So the two stories form a sandwich: Jesus on his way to Jairus, Jesus stopping for the ailing woman, and then Jesus resuming his journey to Jairus' house. And both stories result in miracles.

In a sandwich there are some things that go together and some things that just don't. I remember that when I was a child, a sandwich on raisin bread was a treat. It was a sweet sandwich, rather than a savory one. That sandwich generally had something like cream cheese or jelly on the inside. On the other hand, a hearty bread like rye or pumpernickel seems to cry out for spicy mustard and sharp cheese. Now . . . consider tuna on raisin bread, or just imagine sardines on a cinnamon roll!

I hope your reaction to those combinations was one of queasiness, even disgust. And if you are disgusted, than you will be able to better understand both the stories in our sandwich. Both of them involve something disgusting in the ancient world: violation of purity laws. Purity laws separated things that belong, things in their proper place, from things that don't belong. Clean things from dirty things. Of course what belongs and what does not belong is bound to culture, time and place. Today's stories feature two such serious violations of those first century purity laws that a person would likely be pushed out of a community.

When something about a person was impure and badly out of place, people would shun that person. That would mean becoming instantly homeless. No one would provide food; instead the person would be searching a garbage dump for something to eat. No one would have a conversation, and in fact, people would flee the other way when that impure person came near, causing nearly total social isolation. People were afraid of being tainted. So please understand that what Jesus did in these two stories was enough to put *him* in this position, just by speaking with and having contact with two people who embodied serious violations – because impurity is “catching.” He might have become a complete and total outcast himself, but Jesus was always moving on.

So what were these two gigantic violations? The first one was touching a corpse. We don't think too much about that, in fact, many people touch the hand of a body during calling hours as a gesture of love and respect. Family members might even kiss the dead person. But in Jesus' day, that was considered a huge violation of social codes, and if a person did it, it was disgusting enough to get them totally excluded from the community.

A second very big violation was having any kind of discharge from the body, particularly one that went on for a long time. Never mind that being ill wasn't someone's fault, still the result was being cast out. And so when the woman pushed her way through the crowd and probably touched all kinds of people getting to Jesus, and then, out of consideration for the great teacher,

touched only his clothes, it was a very serious matter. Today we would have compassion for that person, and refer her to immediate medical care. But in the ancient world, it was considered disgusting, so disgusting that the person needed to be excluded completely from society. And because she touched Jesus, he too became just as disgusting, because, you remember, “it’s catching.”

Jesus manages to upset everyone around him. Why would he risk such condemnation and exclusion by violating these laws? Because his primary concern is to show what the kingdom of God is like. And in the kingdom of God, compassion, rather than disgust, should be the concerned and loving response from one child of God toward another. To show this love and concern, Jesus is willing to cross some serious boundaries for the sake of the kingdom. We can see already that this behavior is going to anger the temple authorities. So, early in his ministry, Jesus is making enemies of people who believe that the purity laws are meant to be obeyed, not broken, for the sake of a peaceful society. But we can already see something very important: about keeping the peace - Jesus has *no inclination* or even interest. Nothing else matters when a human life is at stake. Not when one of God’s own is threatened. Not when a woman he doesn’t even know but calls “daughter” is concerned. Not when a child, on the verge of her whole life, suddenly found dead, is concerned. Not even if “it’s catching.”

How significant it is that these two stories are about women, too: a little girl, identified on the verge of her child-bearing years, and a woman whose child-bearing has been halted because she is untouchable. It is interesting that the unimportant person in the story gets a name: Jairus. He is a leader of the synagogue, and probably quite well known. The woman and the little girl don’t get named, yet they are the centerpieces of the story. They are as far removed from the community as possible, one dead, the other considered so ill she must be avoided at all costs. They are hopeless cases, these two. But even nameless, even hopeless, they are the most important ones for Jesus. And how unusual that is for his culture! Women were not the centerpieces of any story, with or without names. Yet our evangelist Mark lovingly records these stories so that we might know the revolutionary nature of the kingdom of God. Not an important male leader, but a female child and a woman restored to normal life. Nobodies who became somebodies. Personified violations reconnected to the family of God. Reconnected to the family of God!

Such boundless compassion is exemplified in what we are seeing in Surfside, Florida, as search and rescue teams comb painstakingly through a shocking pile, listening for signs of life. Like you, I suspect, I have found myself deeply moved by the journalists’ reporting on these teams of extraordinary men and women. They don’t want to stop when their shifts are over, even when the next shift has arrived early and is anxious to get going. Nothing can stop them from offering their particular skills 24/7 under unfolding and uncertain circumstances. They willingly cross the boundaries of fire, water and unknown household chemicals that could explode and cause them grave harm. They are Christ-like in their commitment to the sanctity of human life. Like Jesus, nothing else matters when human life is at stake, not when one of God’s own might be found alive. Not when human remains might be returned to a grieving family.

We witnessed similar living compassion during the recent pandemic, when medical teams worked nonstop as sick people continued to arrive at hospitals. We looked at pictures of living exhaustion as they took short breaks from the relentless illness. In such compassion all of us have witnessed an unfolding of the kingdom of God in the midst of horrific tragedies.

It is hard to see anything about these tragedies as good news, especially for those feeling jaded about the state of humankind. But it is, because this is The Way of Love, breaking through. And you see, "it is catching!" Loving our neighbors as ourselves, as Jesus did, brings the reign of God ever closer. That God desires wholeness for us, even in our deepest misery, no matter how severe, or even how degrading, is good news of the very best kind. That there is no place that the love of God is not with us, no place where the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, cannot be found. For this good news, thanks be to God!