

Arise!
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
5 June 2005
Text: Matthew 9:18-26/Mark 5:21-43

Why Men Hate Going to Church.

It's the title of a recently-published book about the disturbing gender gap in Christian communities. Women constitute the majority of participants in almost every form of church-related activity. Across Roman Catholic, Orthodox, mainline Protestant and evangelical churches research has discovered that "no matter the name on the outside, there are always more women on the inside." Author David Murrow hypothesizes the reasons for this disparity have to do with everything from hormones and brain structure to prehistoric imprinting. *Men can't sit still, want to be outdoors, aren't very verbal and can't read and sing at the same time. Men crave adventure, risk, danger and heroic sacrifice. Men value boldness. They love action, tools, technology and competition. Men are hunters and warriors. Women are gatherers and child-tenders. [from a review in the New York Times, by Peter Steinfels, Saturday, June 5, 2005]*

While I find the author's breezy style and stereotypical descriptions problematic, he has identified a reality many of us are reluctant to name. Fact is, our worship attendance fits that pattern too, and I've heard some of our members wonder aloud what Fairmount offers that specifically addresses men's concerns and perspectives. I don't believe that men generally are less interested in spirituality than are women, and I don't think their spiritual needs are any less profound. But somehow, the Christian church overall has missed addressing the particular ways and means men find God and express their devotion.

Alas, the gender gap is not the only "gap" that threatens our churches and communities. I shook my head ruefully at the headlines on the same day in the *Plain Dealer*: the controversy in a nearby suburb about how long lawn grass should be before it constitutes a nuisance, alongside news of a Cleveland teen convicted of murder in a gang-war clash, UN estimates that more than 5.5 million Africans will need emergency food aid or face starvation, and the fact that our Ohio legislature has not yet developed a fair and equitable (let alone constitutional!) way to fund public education. We are divided by gender, by race, by socio-economic status, by religion and country of origin. Men and women, rich and poor, black and white, haves and have-nots. Which leaves us, one and all,

impoverished and sick. The human community is broken and in need of healing.

The gospel text this morning addresses this condition—which is a spiritual condition—head on. Matthew interweaves two stories so completely that we are compelled to understand them together. Both concern Jesus' healing response to two persons in dire need. As it happens, both are female (I originally entitled the sermon "Daughters, Arise," but after reading *Why Men Hate Going to Church* I omitted the gender reference). As we come to see the essential connection between the two, we discover an important insight for bridging the gaps in contemporary communities. The text from Matthew listed in your bulletin narrates this story; I have chosen instead to read Mark's fuller version of the same story. Listen for God's word to women and men, to the church in the world in the reading from the gospel according MARK in the fifth chapter at the 21st verse, found on page _____ of the chapel/pew Bibles.

[MARK 5:21-43]

Think with me, if you will, about the postures demonstrated in these accounts. A leader of the synagogue comes and falls at Jesus' feet with an urgent request. Jesus instantly gets up and follows him. On the way, a woman who has been troubled with illness for a long time, comes up behind him and touches the fringe of his cloak—stooping to do so. When she is healed, Jesus is aware of it. She throws herself before him, explaining everything, and Jesus acknowledges her graciously, and sends her on her way in peace. Continuing on to the leader's house, he throws out the mourners, takes the little girl by the hand, and raises her from her death bed to life. Jesus' presence has a way of lifting people from fear, from shame, from illness, from death itself. In Jesus' touch there is healing and hope, enough to go around, because everyone in the story experiences transformation.

The gospel writer could hardly have paired more distinct characters: the little girl whose father Jairus is a leader of the synagogue, a man of position, power, and wealth; the bleeding woman—whose medical condition has rendered her "impure"— an outcast who was forbidden to appear in public, let alone touch a rabbi. She has spent all her money in unsuccessful treatments. The little girl is from a wealthy, well-connected family; the woman is all alone. Matthew wants us to understand that these two represent the opposite ends of the social spectrum (*I am indebted to Ched Myers, "Say to the This Mountain: Mark's Story of Discipleship," Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1996, pp 64-66*).

Now, having set up the contrast between the two individuals, Matthew goes on to show how their healing is related. When Jesus stops to ask who has touched him, the disciples dismiss the question as absurd: "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you even ask?" To them it's a crowd, faceless and anonymous. Jesus, however, persistently seeks the one who has come to him out of need. When she comes to him and pours out her story, Jesus commends her faith (that has moved her even to break the law!), and reinstates her place in the family circle: "Daughter....go in peace, and be healed of your disease." While he is still speaking, some folk come from Jairus' house with the news that his daughter is dead. It's almost as if the delay caused by the exchange with the bleeding woman has prevented Jesus from the good he had first set out to do. But Jesus counters this conclusion with a strong word to Jairus: "Do not fear, only believe." In other words, "Jairus, did you see what just happened here? You could learn from this poor woman a little something about faith." And so he could, for Jesus then proceeds to the little girl's death bed and raises her to life.

Mark's aside that she was 12 years old is a detail meant to reinforce the connection between her and the woman who had been struggling with her illness for....12 years. The narrative has brought us full circle. Two "daughters of Israel"—one privileged and one impoverished—represent the social inequality of the time which had pushed the community to the point of death. Jesus came to save, to heal and restore, but that life-giving mission necessarily takes him into "the crowd"—the ones most everyone else relegates to statistics, categories, or "problems." And yet, it is through the healing and restoration of this poor daughter that the rich daughter is also healed.

The health and well-being of our communities depend upon the health and well-being of its poorest and most vulnerable members. God created the world to provide abundantly for all, and we who have abundance are accountable to God for the beloved of God's family who lack it. Yes, I think that means a faithful examination of political solutions to urgent issues such as living wages, food for everyone, quality educational opportunity for all children, clean water and air. Economist Jeffrey Sachs has written a book diagnosing the causes of global poverty and offering a reasonable and astonishingly simple plan for eliminating it. The disease he concentrates on is "extreme poverty"—affecting about a billion of earth's people living primarily in Africa and South Asia who subsist on about a dollar a day or less. He calculates that transferring 31 cents a day per extremely poor person from the rich nations—a total of 124 billion dollars—would be enough to set them on a path toward economic growth and a brighter future. 124 billion dollars is a lot of money...but it

represents only six-tenths of 1 percent of the total income of rich nations. In fact, the United States could pay its share of that by simply repealing the Bush tax cuts for people making over \$500,000 a year [Bill McKibben, "Poor No More: Strategies of Global Development in the Christian Century, May 31, 2005, referring to Jeffrey Sachs' book "The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time, Penguin, 2005]. You can take issue with this analysis (and I think it does bear further study), but it begs the moral question about how we can turn away from such economic disparities. Active engagement in government is the mark not only of a good citizen, but of a good Christian.

But it's more than that, as you and I know very well. The gospel of Jesus Christ compels us to look at our own lifestyles, the choices we make every day about how to spend our money and our time and our energy. Despite unprecedented economic prosperity in the United States, one in six American children is still poor, and the number increases to one in three among children of color [Jim Wallis, "God's Politics," pp. 236-7]. Our own relative affluence can make our spiritual sickness tolerable...for awhile. We dose ourselves with "retail therapy" and believe somehow that the one with the most toys, wins. But an Arabic saying counters with a reminder that "there are no pockets in a shroud." Money can't buy you love. . . .or real life. For that we need a healing touch that renews our commitment to the common good; the sense that my salvation is dependent upon yours; our well-being is ensured only as "theirs" is as well. Following Jesus will surely take us "into the crowd"---to the places where people are in need. And like Jairus, we may well discover there that finally we are more alike than different. We all stand in need of God's grace and mercy, and God desires nothing more than to pour out those gifts. Through others' healing likewise comes our own. The pursuit of justice and shared blessing will bring all to abundant life.

More than one of you showed me the fascinating *Plain Dealer* article pointing out the cross-cultural connection between Scottish Psalm-singing in which a leader "lines-out" the verses, and African-American call- and-response-style gospel music. Research by Yale professor and jazz musician Willie Ruff has helped connected the dots to the extent that he believes "the basic stuff that would later be spirituals, blues, ragtime, jazz, bebop....has some of this genetic DNA." The article profiled a Presbyterian congregation in northwest Alabama and a Gaelic Presbyterian congregation in the Isle of Lewis in the Hebrides who have exchanged visits and described themselves as "family."

In my mind's eye I see it: reserved, Scottish Presbyterian and exuberant African-American Presbyterian standing side by side, praising God together. Now I ask you: is that an enterprise for the faint-of-heart-or-

faith? For those who want neither adventure nor risk? Healing the rips and tears in our tattered social fabric will require bold action and strong relationships; intellectual powers and emotional intelligence; the very best of both men and women.

Daughters and sons, arise. Go in peace and be healed. And by the grace of God, become agents of healing. Amen.

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