

B Proper 8 | The Rev'd Richard L. Schaper

St. Stephen's, Belvedere

July 1, 2018

During the week that lies ahead I will be joining many of you who, on the 242<sup>nd</sup> birthday of our nation, will be celebrating the blessings of this land in which you and I are privileged to live. I was born into this land. My mother immigrated here when she was 8 years old and my father's mother and father immigrated here when they were young adults.

America is a land of immigrants. In early centuries most came from Europe. But more recently have received rich streams of people from all over the world, drawn to the security and prosperity which we ourselves enjoy.

My mother would from time to time be moved to recite by heart the words inscribed on the pedestal of Lady Liberty which she had sailed past in New York Harbor:

"Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

I suspect that it is because I had this upbringing that I was put off from the outset by the campaign slogan: 'America First!' that is now being enacted in our foreign policy and commercial relations. For America is already first. Never has there been a more wealthy and prosperous nation in the history of the world.

But we are citizens not just of the United States of America. We are also citizens of the world and denizens and stewards of the planet Earth. This is made clear in the Book of Beginnings, of Genesis, that opens our scriptures. After the Lord God created humankind he charged us to have dominion over the earth and our fellow creatures. Dominion is not domination. Dominion is caring stewardship. On our watch many irreplaceable species are becoming irreversibly extinct.

Our allegiance to our global community of humankind and to our global community of fellow creatures relativizes and informs our rightful national patriotism.

Selfishness and greed, unchecked by common norms of civility and generosity, can wreck destruction and threaten our common weal.

On this Sunday closest our dearest national holy day, it is well for us as followers of Jesus to reflect upon the values of our faith, and also the values enshrined in the founding documents of our country—the truths which we hold to be self-evident. And to ask ourselves how these values are expressed-- or contradicted-- by the policies and moral tone of our government today.

This is a time of upheaval. People of faith and of good will are called to deepen our resolve and act boldly to uphold the values to which our faith commits us: values of compassion, of devotion to truth, of concern for the downtrodden. What does the Lord require of you? asks the prophet Micah. But to love mercy, to do justice and walk humbly with your God. These are the values of the Holy Scriptures. And, this is the way of Jesus—as is so clear in today’s gospel lesson.

Today’s passage from the gospel according to St. Mark is remarkable in several respects.

Do you remember how it goes?

Jesus re-lands on the near shore of the Sea of Galilee, his home territory, and is immediately begged to heal a sick young girl who is at the point of death and whose father is frantic. As Jesus is going with him to his home, a great throng of people is gathering around Jesus and pressing about him.

Jesus is sensitive to the energy exchanges that are constantly taking place between people, and he senses that power has gone out of him. “Who touched me?” he asks. This leads to an exchange with a woman who has been healed on the spot of affliction that has troubled her and made her unclean for 12 years.

Then Jesus continues his journey to the house of Jairus where he will take his dead daughter by the hand and raise her to life.

These two stories—the one of the woman with the ongoing hemorrhage, and the one of the young woman sick unto death—are interwoven in a way that scripture scholars refer to as an intercalation. This interwovenness, scholars submit, is an indication that the author intends the stories to be taken together and interpreted in light of each other.

There are other clues to their interconnectedness as well: both subjects are women and although they both presumably are Jews, as women they are nonpersons in the culture in which they live. Furthermore, both the woman with the issue of blood and dead little girl would be considered to be ritually unclean such that if Jesus were to come into contact with either one of them, he himself would be considered to be unclean and subject to being ostracized—not a good condition for a rabbi to be in.

Finally there is also the number 12: we are told that the woman has been plagued by the issue of blood for 12 years, and, after the young woman has been raised from the dead and is walking around, the narrator adds the note: “She was 12 years of age.” So the number 12 is another factor that links these two people and these two stories together.

What is the message, the kerygma, that St. Mark is proclaiming by presenting us with these two twinned Biblical accounts?

The first seems to me to be Jesus’ special concern for women, which in the context of his time was so exceptional. A person’s claim to healing, to wholeness, was not to be disregarded simply because that person happened to be female instead of male. Being female may have robbed this woman of her claim to be recognized as a person in the eyes of the law—but it does not disenfranchise her from making a claim on the compassion of God. That there are TWO such women emphasizes that this is not a one-off but rather a pattern of Jesus’ behavior.

A second message is that there is a mysterious power to heal, to make the broken whole, and that Jesus is transparent to this healing power and is an agent of this healing power. So many people were drawn to Jesus for this reason. In this Galilean rabbi people detected a pathway to what they most desperately longed for—healing, mending of broken hearts and of paralyzed limbs. This is why crowds constantly him and why officials were suspicious of him.

A third message in these stories is Jesus disregard for prevailing social and religious norms with respect to what was considered to be ritually clean and unclean. This is another factor that set Jesus at odds with officialdom. The gospel according to St. Mark has been characterized as an extended passion narrative, and in a passage such as we are mining for gold today, early hearers of Mark's gospel could clearly witness the mounting tension that will lead eluctibly to Christ's execution.

For a woman with flow of blood to have entered into close proximity with other people—not to mention a rabbi—let alone reach out to intentionally touch his clothes—was strictly vor botten and to be roundly condemned. For her bloody presence would have been seen as contaminating all those who were near her. The only socially acceptable condition for such a woman was isolation, quarantine.

Perhaps you noticed the news article earlier this week calling attention to menstruating women in very traditional communities in Nepal who had died from being confined in so-called “red tents” to ward off contamination of those around them. This exemplifies the social norms in Palestine in Jesus' time—which is the reason that this interacting of Jesus with this hemorahging woman would have been so striking the original hearers of this story. To them the story would have come as a great shock. And equally shocking would have been hearing Jesus declare to this bold bleeding woman that her sins are forgiven. The comes the further shock of hearing that Jesus went and touched a dead body—and the dead body of woman, at that!

You see there was no end to the affronts that Jesus was guilty of when it comes to reaching across social norms and cultural taboos to enact the limitless compassion of the One who sent him.

Jesus was no fool. Jesus could see where this was bound to lead him—illuctably to the cross. Jesus could see this. But he was willing to pay the price.

This is why Jesus, on that last night with those who followed him, said: “This is my blood, poured out for you—for the forgiveness of sins, for the dismantling of all that separates you from

God and from one another. Do not countenance what separates you, but rather embrace what unites you.

In the Book of Common Prayer, it states (on page ) that the mission of the church—that is, of Jesus' followers is “to restore the unity of all people with God and with one another...” This was the mission of Jesus Christ, and it is our mission as well.

How does fulfilling this mission of reconciliation call for us to live and to act today in the circumstances of our lives and of our nation? “To restore the unity of all people with God and with one another.” This is a question worth pondering on this Sunday as we approach the Fourth of July.

How are we being called to witness to the Gospel in our days?

This is not a time in which we may remain silent.