

Stop and Engage

Wayne Waibel – 06/30/2024

What we have in today's gospel lesson is what scholars refer to as the "Markan Sandwich." A story within a story. The tendency in preaching this kind of story is to focus on one of them to the exclusion of the other. In today's lection, however - the two stories are just too relatable to omit either.

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The way Mark weaves these stories together is genius. It is not only intentional, it is inspired. He uses the scene to clarify and highlight a truth that rests solidly on the heart of Jesus. Those on the fringes of society have a rightful place in direct relationship with the Lord.

The unnamed woman has an affliction that renders her unclean or impure in the eyes of her community, so she is already outcast. The fact that she has spent all of her wealth in seeking a cure renders her impoverished – strike two. Then, of course, she's a woman – so strike three.

Despite her station in life, she has the courage and audacity to approach and then go so far as to touch the cloak of Jesus, reasoning that doing so will make her whole – and it does.

And that act garners a completely divine reaction from Jesus, who – as a male in first century Palestine – could've had the woman punished for stepping way outside of acceptable public behavior. Or He could've done nothing – simply continued on His way to Jairus' home.

Instead, He stopped and engaged the woman. Jesus enters into relationship with this marginalized outcast. Further – He extends that relationship to a level of intimacy reserved for family. She may be unnamed in the Biblical text, but He calls her daughter. Then and only then does He continue on His urgent journey to engage another daughter.

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How often do we get interrupted on our way to somewhere else? To my mind – that is a standard in the modern world. Our attention is diverted regularly in the course of a normal day. How we handle those intrusions can define our character.

Most people elect to prioritize, organize, and assign a slot in the calendar as these intrusions occur. That is the effective and efficient way of dealing with life. In fact – to operate in any other manner is generally looked upon with disfavor, particularly in the corporate world.

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The heart of grace is the life-giving power of God. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Mark's double narrative. Jesus restores the life of a woman who has been suffering for twelve years, and a little girl who is but twelve. They are both equally marginalized, and yet rise to the top of Christ's list of priorities.

"Do not be afraid; only believe," transforms our fear to trust. Even our flaws and weaknesses are precious to God, who can transform them into virtues and strengths. He LOVES doing that sort of thing. Like taking a sinner such as Paul and transforming him into a spiritual dynamo capable of selling the wealthy Gentiles of Corinth on the idea of supporting the Jewish Churches in Jerusalem.

Christian giving is measured not in dollars, but by the desire to give. Because we are in the enviable position of understanding that all giving is ultimately a giving back. None of us would have made it this far without the kindness and generosity of total strangers.

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We are called to be agents of transformation. The reign of God is no longer near – it is here. And it is of particular importance that those of us who are not afraid, avail ourselves to the many who need a little help along the way.

When an entire section of a building crumbles to dust in the wee hours of the morning, we answer the call and begin the search for life among the ruins. We do not run away in fear. We do not look to assign blame and insist on restitution. We follow the call of our savior – stop – and engage.

All prayers are not answered as we pray them. But we do understand that at the very least, to ask something of God is to edge into deeper relationship with Him. And He may not come when we call Him, but He will be there right on time.

The clamor of daily life often precludes us from seeing the kingdom at work in the world, but it is out there. You don't necessarily have to look deep either. Small, even less than obvious scenes play out every day.

Spend a little time at just about any Children's Hospital, and you'll see it on display in room after room. Animal shelters harbor a good many gentle souls that spend countless hours tending to the needs of our furry friends. And then there are the myriad of first responders who lay their lives on the line as a matter of routine.

Add to that the legions of folks out there who stop and engage in a rich volley of prayer day in and day out, often on behalf of people they don't even know. And they do this because they understand how blessed they are to live in a world such as this – where the kingdom of God – is at hand. Amen.