

Making Space

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

June 28, 2009

Jill R. Russell

Texts: 2 Samuel 1.1, 17-27; Psalm 130, 2 Corinthians 8.7-15, Mark 5.21-43

As we come into the 4th of July this week, our collective attention is drawn toward the freedoms we enjoy as citizens of this country. I'm thinking today about one I've always taken for granted and I suspect many of us have as well. I'm thinking about the seamless transition that happens between administrations when one political party displaces another as a result of our elections¹. I never thought about that until fairly recently after seeing how violence can erupt as the result of elections as happened in Kenya in 2007 or more recently in Iran. Gordon's sermon last week asking "who's in charge here" could not be more relevant when it comes to these moments of transitions in power. We are at one of those moments in the story of David and of Israel today.

A lot has transpired since the prophet Samuel secretly anointed David as the next king of Israel (as we read 2 weeks ago). David makes his way from the flocks of his father to the courts of King Saul; marrying his daughter, forging a deep and abiding friendship with his son, and serving as the head of his army. Despite all of these points of connection, the relationship between David and Saul is complex to say the least. It is fraught with turmoil and intrigue. Saul on several occasions tries to kill David. Even the way that this message of Saul's death comes to David is filled with double-crossing treachery. One of the enemies of Israel comes to tell David that Saul is dead. He is clearly hoping to benefit from this rivalry between them and he is fully expecting David to seize the moment and grab the power of the empty throne.² What David does instead is set aside all of these political or personal aspirations and with the dignity befitting a king acknowledges the momentous impact of this event for what it is: the death of Israel's first king. He makes space with this lamentation we read here today for the nation of Israel to grieve. David attends first to the healing of his country, knowing that the first step to healing requires space and time and permission to grieve for one's suffering, to recollect the past, and to feel the full weight of all that has been lost.

¹ A member of the church challenged this assumption after worship stating that people lose their jobs when these changes in administration happen which is certainly true enough. There is a great deal of upheaval that happens as a result but as far as I know it has never led to violence and that is worth celebrating!

² See 1 Samuel 31 and 2 Samuel 1.2-16.

We are not so good at moments like these - not as a nation – not as communities – few of us are good at this as individuals. It is deeply ingrained in our culture – especially those of us formed out of northern European descent – to deny the grief of our lives. We strive to be “strong” by which we mean forging ahead and living life as if nothing happened. I can tell you how resistant churches are to taking time and space to grieve. As an interim pastor one of my main tasks was to help a congregation look at their past. Our purpose was, of course, to celebrate their strengths but also to name and grieve their losses. No matter how strongly I encouraged this work of recollection and grieving, churches resisted. My experience is that when communities fail to do it, unexpressed grief comes out in all kinds of strange and disruptive ways. I had a spiritual teacher who loved aphorisms...and one of hers was “you have to feel it, before you can heal it.”

That’s what David provides for Israel in this lamentation – a sacred public space for the nation of Israel to name and to grieve the loss of their first king. When you give yourself space to look back and feel sadness for what has been lost it is a way to place importance and value on that experience or that relationship or that moment in history. And by valuing what has come before, you simultaneously give yourself space to leave it behind and step into the future.³

There is an interesting point of connection here to the healing stories from Mark. I know that for many of us these healing stories are hard to take in. They do not conform to our understanding of how the world works. The few Christian communities that do touch back to these stories do so in a way that for many of us feels manipulative and dangerous. I’m thinking here about faith healers who draw big crowds with the promise to miraculously cure disease claiming to have the power to heal in the way that Jesus healed. We don’t want anything to do with that kind of scene and so some of us simply step over these stories all together. I don’t know how to explain what happened when the woman touched Jesus’ cloak and felt the bleeding in her body stop. But I do know this: there is something for us in these texts. Jesus identified this power of healing as a sign of what life in God’s kingdom is like. When we live at peace with God, with neighbor, with self and with creation – when the world is as it should be – we discover wholeness, balance, and healing of soul and of body. This is what the realm of God is to be like.

³ Walter Brueggemann describes this dynamic in his commentary: *First and Second Samuel, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), pg 218.

There are all kinds of symbols and metaphors swimming around these healing stories which suggest that there is much more going on here than what we read on the surface of the story. Everything from the 12 years that the woman suffered her bleeding disorder and the 12 years this young girl has lived. Twelve is a big number in scripture. We have the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 disciples of Jesus. To the geography: Jesus is crossing the sea again as this story begins. Gentiles live on one side and Jews on the other. The healing power of God was unleashed in both territories. There are many themes going on in these texts about who Jesus is and what God and God's kingdom is like.

I want to look at one part of what is happening in this story today. The story begins with Jairus who is a leader of the synagogue. He is a man of power and position who risked the judgment of his fellow congregants by seeking out help from Jesus. The suffering of his daughter has pushed him past all political considerations to do whatever he can to ease her pain and to save her life. On their way another desperate, suffering soul makes her way to Jesus. She does not come publically. Her bleeding disorder makes her ritually unclean. She isn't even supposed to be near crowds. Her suffering goes far beyond the physical pain of her body. At least as intense would be the social isolation forced on her. Think about the way people suffering from AIDS were treated in the 1980s and you get some sense of what life for this woman has been like.

She thinks the power for healing came when she touched Jesus' cloak and she felt the bleeding in her body stop. Jesus knew that the real power of healing was yet to occur. It unfolded in his conversation with this woman. It happened as he made the powerful man of position wait and he made space in the midst of that crowd for this woman who had been ignored, shamed, and cast aside. He makes space for her to tell the whole truth of her life. And after he hears the whole truth, he declares that it is her own faith that has made her well. Being cured of her disease is not the center of this healing story. Finding the faith and dignity to pursue healing when everyone else has cast her aside, having that faith acknowledged, and being given space to tell the whole truth of her life: that's the center of this healing story both for this woman and for Jairus.

I don't have any illusions that the church can provide the kind of healing that cures people of disease by a simple touch. But making space for people to find faith and dignity – even in the midst of suffering – to have that faith acknowledged - to be given space to grieve their losses and to tell the whole truth of their life.....**that's** something we **can** do. It's not real easy for us....creating that kind of sacred space. It requires us to step back from all the frenetic activities of church life to make space for this kind of conversation. More than that, it requires us to set aside the

façade that we have life all put together. I think this is particularly hard for us at Hope Church. This is a place with some very talented and accomplished people. We tend to share our gifts and our strength – to highlight our achievements and successes. It’s a challenge to be able to celebrate those things about our lives and then also acknowledge that there is more to the story: to tell the **whole** truth of our lives. It requires a real vulnerability with each other and a deep commitment to create safe space where people feel that what they share will be honored and will not become the object of someone’s scrutiny, judgment, or gossip. It’s pretty hard to pull off in the midst of church life.

We’ve begun a conversation as youth leaders at Hope Church about some of the formative experiences of our faith as young people - wanting to identify what is at the heart of what we need to provide in our youth ministry. I realized in thinking back that for me one of the formative experiences of my faith was a couple of key adults who made space for me to tell the whole truth of my life. One of those was my cousin, Judy. She is quite a bit older than me and was busy raising her family when I was growing up. But she invited me to her home for a week every summer. In the midst of a busy home life with four kids, for one whole week, she made space for me to talk about anything and everything. While we cooked dinner or took the kids to the lake I would just sit and tell Judy all the things that I hid from everyone else: my questions – the things I worried about – the parts of myself I was afraid to let others see – we talked about family and God and disappointments and relationships. I told her all the things I had saved up over the course of a year and just being in her presence I felt the Spirit of Christ doing for me, in a small way, what Jesus did for this woman in the crowd.

It makes me wonder how we can make space in our life together for that kind of healing to occur....as Jesus did for this unnamed woman in the crowd.

I wonder what it means for us to tell the whole truth of our life....as she dared to do when confronted by Jesus.

I wonder what it looks like to set aside the urgency of our needs to tend first to the suffering of another..... as Jairus learned to do in this story.

These questions are probably just the beginning of what God might do with us as we sit before these texts this week.

So let’s make some space and listen for the healing wisdom of God’s Spirit to move among us. Amen.