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Proper 8B
Peace, Seattle
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Mark 5:21-43

THE GREAT HEALER

The entire fifth chapter of Mark is a series of healing stories, one layered on top of the other. Today two of them are before us: stories of a woman and a girl; one who's suffered 12 years with a chronic illness, the other who, at 12 years old, lies at the door of death.

I cannot read today's gospel without remembering a woman named Jeanerette, a member of the Karuk Tribe who introduced me to the healing traditions of her people when I was just starting out in ministry.

My first opportunity came when she invited me to a Brush Dance, a four-day gathering where the community comes together for the healing of a sick child. This Dance was held at Katamin, an ancient site at the confluence of the Klamath and Salmon Rivers, a place the Karuk people call "Center-Of-The-World."

That first night, as the dusk turned into dark, we gathered around the sunken Dance pit [about 30 ft diameter] where the healer and her assistant sat with the sick child and his mother.

After the fire was struck, the dancers—men and boys, young women and girls—filed into the Dance pit and took up their places shoulder to shoulder along its cedar planked perimeter.

The first song you hear at a Brush Dance is a Heavy Song.
The word "heavy" describes both how the song sounds, and how it functions.

A heavy song is sung slowly and deliberately; its somber tone is a cross between a lament and a cry. The minor melody, passed down from generation to generation, has the effect of gathering the minds of the people together and taking them down, like ballast on a diver's weight belt, down below the surface, down deep into the realm of the sacred.

This song, this Heavy Song, is also heavy for another reason: the health of a child lies in the balance. Restoring him will take care and skill. Later there will be other songs; but first, the Heavy Song must be sung.

And as the singer begins and dancers start moving together to its rhythm, the soul of the community in drawn inward and focused downward as if to say, THE PLACE WHERE WE ARE STANDING IS HOLY GROUND.

When I hear these stories in Mark, I hear the echo of the Heavy Song in the bleeding woman's hidden crisis and in the wrenching cry of Jairus.

And when I hear these stories, I hear the echo of the Heavy Song reverberating at our nation's southern border where thousands of asylum-seeking parents have been separated from their children and children from their parents. Can you imagine the trauma? I know you can.

Every parent I know can tell a story or two about being separated from their child—if only for a brief moment—while shopping, or visiting the zoo or amusement park, or traveling, or just hanging out in the neighborhood.

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A story of momentarily losing track of each other, and how the inner parental alarm started going off and the adrenaline started to kick in, and they start calling out, looking, phoning, canvasing the neighborhood, until—heaven help them—they were reunited. You know what I'm talking about.

When our family was aboard a boat crossing the English Channel on a windy, overcast day, we lost track of 6-year-old Naomi on the stern of that huge ferry, and in a matter of seconds our emotions went from concerned to alarmed to frantic as we scoured the decks of that great ship searching for her, casting stricken glances at the receding trail of gray, churning water.

We found her, of course, safe and sound. But telling the story four years after the fact still makes me weak in the knees!

Imagine the trauma, then, that accompanies the purposeful and forcible separation of children from their parents! How can it not affect both deeply, carving deep emotional wounds in the psyche that will never be forgotten? Even if the policy is effectively reversed, those wounds will endure.

Trauma and desperation are central parts of that story and cannot and should not be easily dismissed. And they are part of our gospel today—as anyone who's carried a child into the emergency room, or taken the well worn trail from doctor to doctor to doctor knows.

So let's follow the Heavy Song, for a moment, down below the surface of our text, as we focus in on the story of Jairus and his daughter.

We all know, then, the urgency Jairus feels as he breaks through the crowd, falls down at Jesus' feet, digs his nails into the dirt and pleads for his daughter.

MY LITTLE GIRL IS DYING! COME LAY YOUR HANDS ON HER, THAT SHE MAY LIVE!

Many of us have known moments like these. Moments when our loved one is in danger, and we wait for the God of compassion to come, to relieve us, to feed our hope that some miracle might be possible despite of the poor prognosis.

Jesus takes in this father's cry, agrees to follow him, and is on his way when another desperate story intervenes. And when that encounter with the bleeding woman is over, just as they are ready to set out again, the word comes from Jairus' home that now it's too late. The girl is gone.

The final lines of W. H. Auden's poem, Funeral Blues, capture the feeling of those moments after the news has reached Jairus' ears:

> The stars are not wanted now: put out every one; pick up the moon and dismantle the sun,
> Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood, for nothing now can ever come to any good.

David's lament over the death of Saul and Jonathan continues the theme:

> You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields
> For there the shield of the mighty was defiled...Oh how the mighty have fallen!

King David, the text tells us, ordered that his poem be taught to the people of Judah so that the whole nation might enter into the lament. Nations need such heavy songs to appropriate and to process the crises and disasters that befall them. Perhaps our leaders, and by extension, all of us, could benefit from taking a page from David's operations manual.

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We had a feeling it might end like this for Jairus and his beloved daughter, even though the healing of the bleeding woman opened up a small ray of hope in the back corner of our minds for the girl.

We thought it might end like this—and now the messengers confirm it.

But Jesus does not accept the messengers' pronouncement.
He has another ending in mind for this story. DO NOT FEAR, he tells Jairus, ONLY BELIEVE.

And moments later he is taking the girl by the hand and commanding her to rise: **TALITHA CUM!**
And the heavy song is transformed into a song of praise.

I've often wondered—did the 12 year old girl, and the woman who after 12 years bled no more, ever come to know each another? What was life like for them after Jesus' visitation?

Whether they came to know each other or not, their stories became forever linked in the memory of their communities, woven into the fabric of testimony about the healing power of the Lord of life.

Healing can be a powerful experience, but it can be oh so frightening. It demands so much of us. It asks us to risk, to open ourselves to the possibility of change, to allow our lives to be transformed in ways that we cannot control. In order to be healed we must first be prepared to admit that we are sick. The woman who touched the hem of Christ's garment was willing to take that risk. And so was Jairus. And you and I can be too.

Like them, we are invited once again and always to offer up our own selves, this congregation, and this whole broken world to the healing power of God in Jesus, trusting that Christ will indeed hear our heavy song, even when the healing we seek does not come in the form we long for.

Yes, we trust that the power which called them back to life will raise us, too, providing us with balm and empowering us as we reach out across the manmade borders and traumas that afflict our neighborhoods and world, so we can be Christ for others.

Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.