

“Letting Go a Little and Trusting More”

Mark 5:21–43

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In the summer of 2008, I spent a couple weeks in Israel and parts of the West Bank. It was a pilgrimage with other clergy funded by the CF Foundation, the same trip Lynn Lingafelt took with a group of clergy that included our new Minister of Music, Warren Howell. It was a transformational experience, but I did not get much out of one day.

Part of the problem was that along with eighteen other members of our group of twenty-two, I had some kind of food poisoning, we think from the tilapia from Lake Galilee we had for lunch the day before in Tiberias, what locals call St. Peter’s fish. We were all groggy that day. But the other part of the problem was that the day did not go as planned. We were supposed to cross the lake and visit the site where Jesus encountered the Gerasene demoniac. Instead, we just motored around the lake on a boat all day, viewing various sites from a distance.

We learned later why we did not cross the lake as planned. This was the summer of 2008, as I have said, an election year in the U.S., and a certain senator from Illinois who was running for president was touring the area east of Lake Galilee that day. The Israeli government did not want any incidents so no one was allowed on that side of the lake.

In any event, what we did that day was probably filled with learning opportunities. I just didn’t appreciate them because of my grogginess and because they didn’t match my expectations. Like many of you, I am a careful planner. I like to know what my day will involve and I schedule things carefully. It seems like a responsible way to live and do ministry. Those who put together international trips like the one I took are even more detailed-oriented. That day couldn’t go as planned, and because I didn’t adjust my thinking, I didn’t get much out of it.

Jesus doesn’t seem to have this problem. Most of his ministry is carried out not as the result of a detailed plan — though there is an

overarching purpose — but as a response to human need and the leadership of God’s Spirit. Today’s reading from Mark 5 provides an example of this reality. Jesus has just come back from the area east of Lake Galilee where he has healed the Gerasene demoniac. We don’t know what Jesus has planned for the day, but when he arrives, a leader from the local synagogue named Jairus falls at his feet and says his daughter is at the point of death and he wants Jesus to come and heal her. Whatever Jesus had planned, he sets it aside and goes with Jairus.

On the way, crowds follow him and press in on him, and suddenly he senses that power has left his body. He asks who has touched him. His disciples note the obvious — there are too many people to tell. But a woman comes forward with fear and trembling, falls down before him, and says it was her. Mark tells us she has been hemorrhaging for twelve years and the doctors have only added to her misery. This condition will have left her an outcast, and for any woman, not to mention an outcast like her, to touch a rabbi is forbidden. So, she sneaks up on Jesus and touches him. Jesus offers no judgment. “Daughter, your faith has made you well;” he says, “Go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

So, Jesus pauses for a short time to respond to this need that has presented itself, he adjusts his adjusted plan, but then he returns to his journey with Jairus. When they arrive at the house, they are told Jairus’ daughter is dead. There is weeping and wailing. But Jesus says she is only sleeping. The mourners laugh at him, perhaps derisively, but he ignores them, sends the crowds away, and with only the child’s parents and his companions with him, he goes to Jairus’ daughter. He takes her by the hand and says, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!” And immediately she does, whereupon he tells everyone present not to tell anyone what he has done but to give the poor girl something to eat.

The story ends here, or we might say the stories end here. There are two healings woven together in what biblical scholars call a Markan sandwich. We begin and end with a young girl’s sickness and healing and, in the middle, a woman with a long-term challenge is healed. Each part of the sandwich enhances the other, the stories are intertwined, and there are many implications, but one takeaway is about Jesus’ MO. He knows who he is and what he is about. He knows the journey will not be

easy, all paths lead to the cross. But the details of each day are not planned out carefully. Jesus responds to the needs he encounters in the natural rhythm of life and he trusts the Spirit's leadership.

The message is not that planning is unnecessary. There are things that have to be planned for — a choir benefits greatly from rehearsing an anthem; Vacation Bible School has to be planned. And there are people who need to do more planning, be more organized, be less carefree and spontaneous. I am just not one of those people, nor are many of you.

Many of us resonate with a friar from Nebraska John Killinger quotes in his book *Bread for the Journey, Wine for the Wilderness*.

If I had my life to live over, I'd try to make more mistakes next time. I would relax, I would limber up, I would be sillier than I have been this trip. I know of a very few things I would take seriously. I would be less hygienic. I would take more chances. I would take more trips. I would climb more mountains, swim more rivers and watch more sunsets. I would eat more ice cream. I would have actual troubles and fewer imaginary ones.

You see, I am one of those people who lives prophylactically and sensibly and sanely, hour after hour, day after day. Oh, I have had my moments and, if I had it to do over again, I'd have more of them. In fact, I'd try to have nothing else. Just moments, one after another, instead of living so many years ahead each day. I have been one of those people who never go anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a gargle, a raincoat and a parachute. If I had it to do over again, I would go places and do things and travel lighter than I have. (p. 69)

Some of the details are dated, but we get the idea, and it sounds familiar. Many of us live a carefully planned and controlled life, and there are benefits to this approach, but there are also benefits to freedom and spontaneity. And to come back to Jesus' example, there are benefits to being open to the needs of people we encounter and to the leadership of God's Spirit which quite often is working through these same people.

What might this look like on an individual level? I think of times I have missed a need right before my eyes because I was so obsessed with what I had planned. There are probably times when I missed such need while I was writing a sermon about being open to the needs before us. But I can also think of times when I have set aside my obsession with the order of the day and responded to the needs of a moment.

Several weeks ago, a man buzzed at the church door saying he had a history here and wondering if he could park in our lot while he testified before the legislature. I had more than enough to do, but it felt like someone needed to talk to the man. Why not me? We ended up having numerous connections, he not only parked here but waited for forty-five minutes in the Lewis Lobby until it was time for him to testify, and it just felt like I had done the right thing.

I had a similar experience this week. While I was catching up on many things after having returned from vacation, I learned that a dear out-of-town friend's father was in the hospital here. I had more than enough to do, I hadn't been asked to stop by, but something inside of me, or Someone, seemed to be pulling me in that direction. So, I went, and as it turned out, my friend's father had something pressing, something sacred, he needed to talk about with someone he knew.

I also think of a Sunday morning several years ago when a young woman had passed out at one of our doors. She might have been asked to get up and move on, but instead, Ryan Willis asked if she needed help and then if she was willing to go to a rehab center. She said yes, and agreed, and so with the help of Holly Ivel, he took her. They had planned to come to Sunday School and worship, but they set aside those plans in response to a woman's need and perhaps the Spirit's nudging.

This kind of openness on an individual level seems clear enough, but how might a church become more open to the needs of people and the leadership of God's Spirit? Planning is still critical, and perhaps part of how we prove faithful is simply by being more intentional about seeking God's guidance in our planning. For example, as the facilities assessment committee and the dream team address the challenges of our educational building, and the latter works on a plan to engage the church in a bit of dreaming about ministry first and then the building, what we

are seeking is not just our hopes and dreams. We are seeking God's wishes for us. Such discernment is not simple and straightforward. It is an ongoing process of opening our hearts and minds, expressing our thoughts and considering the thoughts of others, but not getting attached to anything until we have a shared sense that it is of God.

But perhaps there are other ways a church can become more open and flexible. Whatever we plan, we can simply pay attention to the needs around us and sense God's Spirit calling us to address those needs. During COVID, we have realized that through the food truck, we can provide food for healthcare workers, in addition to the food insecure. During many protests this year, we have offered a cup of cold water to protestors and we have allowed police officers to use our restrooms. Planning is important, but some situations cannot be planned for, some needs just confront us in the moment, and the Spirit calls us to respond.

This perspective might apply to one of our greatest missional challenges. We sit in the heart of one of the fastest growing cities in the nation. People are moving here in droves. Most of them have no religious affiliation. Many have an aversion to institutional religion. But they are human beings, children of God who ask ultimate questions and need community. The church, our church, has much to offer. We need plans to help us make connections, but more than plans, we need a way of being that is open and attentive to people we encounter each day. Without that openness, no planned program will be make any difference.

What we are taking about is a bit like flying a kite. We need a plan, have a kite with a string attached, hold on to the string as we try to get the kite in the air. But there has to be air, wind, for the kite to fly, and we cannot force it up. We must allow the wind to lift the kite.

Faith works this way. We have plans to make and work to do, but we cannot get anything up and moving on our own. That requires the lift that only God's Spirit can provide. How do we know where God is leading us? It usually has something to do with the needs of people. Jesus doesn't live a haphazard life, but he does set aside his plans in order to meet the needs of people right in front of him. He lets go of some control and trusts the Spirit's leadership. Such is our calling.