

Proper 8 B
Mark 5:22-24, 35b-43
July 2, 2006

How tender a story is our gospel reading for today! It has lost none of its pathos over the centuries of its telling.

A father, known in the community and a role model for many, seeks out an itinerant preacher in a desperate effort to save the life of his beloved young daughter. He unabashedly throws himself at the feet of a man he does not know, and pleads for help: "Come and lay your hands on my little girl, so she may be well, and live!"

Jesus, the preacher, accompanies the man to his home. Along the way, a message comes. "It's too late. Your daughter is dead." Jesus responds to the news, not with denial or argument, but by gently telling the father, "Don't be afraid. Believe! Come on." The walk to the house continues.

They arrive, and the house is surrounded with grief, with weeping and wailing, with traditional ceremony. Death has touched the little girl, and the depth of sadness is profound. Jesus' comment, "She is only sleeping" is greeted with mocking laughter.

Jesus enters this house of death, and goes to the dead body of the girl. He touches her. He touches death. He takes the girl by the hand and speaks to her: "Sweetheart, it's time to get up!"

Which is just what she did, and to the amazement of all.

There are so many stories within this story, and the one I want to explore with you today is the story of touch. Touch—it's such a basic element of life: connecting, contacting, being joined to another being.

The father in the story understood the potential of touch. He came to Jesus in great faith, asking for that touch. "Lay your hands on my daughter that she may be made well. Let your energy mingle with hers. Touch her so she may feel you, that she might sense that there is life still available to her, through a power oh-so much greater than her own small, sweet self."

What a statement of faith, in the face of death. He believed Jesus' touch could heal. Jesus' touch could heal, but death was touching, too. Death was stripping away the young future from this girl, and stripping away such hope from this loving father. Death was touching, too, as death touches us all.

There is the great death that concludes our earthly living and breathing, and there are all the little deaths, all the losses, along the way. There is the death of debilitating sickness, the death of spurned love, the death of a beloved pet, the death of divorce, the death that accompanies abuse, the death of a career gone awry, the death of dreams and hopes and aspirations unrealized. Death touches all of us.

Yet we shun death, in all its forms. We try to relegate it to the corners of life, labeling death evil, or wrong, or a mistake, but death regularly escapes the confines of the box we put it in. It breaks out of the holding pen, and runs rampant in our lives. Try as we do to outrun it, we are all touched by death, by deaths small and large. It seems to be part of the round of life. St. Francis' hymn even calls it "Sister Death": "For death our sister, praised be, from whom no one alive can flee." Yet we seek to elude death's touch.

In the culture in which Jesus lived, one dared not touch death. To touch a dead body was forbidden. Touching a corpse made one unclean. That's great symbolism, isn't it? Even if death touches us, we are not to touch death.

I wonder if that imperative not to touch death doesn't exist yet today in our culture, though the rule is unwritten. We are still afraid of becoming unclean. It's not cool to handle death, or deaths. It's not encouraged to hold the experience, and turn it over and over in your hand, and sit with it, and feel it – at least not outside the therapist's office or outside your meeting with your spiritual director.

It's not encouraged to feel death for too long, either. Employment policies offer us three days off for the death of a parent, and nothing for the death of a marriage. Anniversaries of deaths are powerful times, but society says we should ignore them. Hallmark makes no such sympathy cards.

Jesus, on the other hand, doesn't abide by the rules. Accompanied by the mother and the father and a few close friends, he boldly enters the house where the little girl lies dead. He ventures beyond the fixed limits of the culture, and going to the bedside, he puts out his hand and touches death. He takes the child by the hand, and says, "Little girl, get up! Come on! It's time for breakfast!"

Amazing things happen when we touch death. When we dare to break the rules and embrace our deaths, when we let ourselves feel the pain and grief, when we see things for what they really are and start to put things into the perspective of life, amazing things happen. That which was dead has new life! God puts life into death! That's what we proclaim so joyfully on Easter Day! And that's what we celebrate with great delight at each Eucharist!

We have the words, but do we live them? Do we see the life in the deaths along our way? Are we willing to sacrifice our cultural principles in order to find life? Do we dare forgo our fixed, settled and hopeless situations, and see them transformed and life-giving?

I asked a dear, dear friend what she was learning from her Parkinson's, and she said, "I'm finally learning to focus. I'm learning to do one thing at a time, and with great care. I'm learning to slow down, and I find that friends notice that, and they, too slow down, and they say they enjoy the journey a whole lot more." I've asked my husband what life he has found in Alzheimer's. He said with a laugh, "Not much!" but went on to say, "Mine may not be the life other's would envy, but it's my life, and I intend to live it. I'm learning to live in the present. I'm learning to be here now."

Pain and death teach us what joy cannot. We need not fear it, or revise it. We need not ignore it or set barriers between ourselves and our deaths. We need to touch them, and in touching them to find life. We need to see in deaths our healing allies. A British writer, Frances Cornford, admonishes us to touch all of life in her poem peculiarly named "To a Fat Lady Seen from a Train." (As an overweight Caucasian female, I can read you this poem!)

"To a Fat Lady Seen from a Train."

O why do you walk through the fields in gloves,
Missing so much and so much?
O fat white woman whom nobody loves,

Why do you walk through the fields in gloves
When the grass is soft as the breast of doves
And shivering sweet to the touch?

I think God in Jesus is asking us to take off our gloves, to get real, to feel our deaths, large and small. I think Jesus is telling us not to fear death. Because it is through them that God brings life. It is through them that we learn of life, and reorient ourselves to life. It is through them that we can be touched by Jesus, the One who has authority over life and death. It is through them that we hear Jesus saying to each one of us, "Sweetheart, get up! Come on, honey. It's time to get up!"

Amen.