

"Only Sleeping"

Mark 5:21-24

July 1, 2012

5th Sunday After Pentecost

What makes you very afraid? What do you really fear? Some would put on an air of bravery and say they fear nothing. I wonder about such an attitude. Most of us fear something. If you take a look at scary movies, it seems that most (if not all) fears are related somehow to death. Movies scare us because they are about the threat of being put to death by a natural disaster, an earthly creature, or an unearthly monster of some sort. Or, the movie will frighten us with the thought of perpetual death, whether it be in the form of a vampire or a zombie. Not only do we empathize with the movie characters that are dying or being threatened with death, we are afraid of it happening to us.

Death IS a scary thing. Those who say otherwise are probably lying or denying it. Death causes such pain for those undergoing it and for those left behind. Death causes such terrible separation. There is a finality about death. Death is bad enough when it strikes an adult. When it strikes a child it is a horror and a grief almost beyond comprehension.

That is the scene in our Gospel reading for today. We have one desperate father named Jairus. Jairus was a ruler in the synagogue, a proud man who likely was very self-sufficient. He also was part of the establishment which was officially against Jesus. For those reasons alone, it seemed there would be no way he would ever turn to Jesus for anything.

But he had a little girl – only 12 years old – who was at the point of death. The pain, fear, and helplessness when your child is near death can hardly be imagined. It is a pain which my wife and I have felt. When Matthew was only 18 months old, he was at the point of death because of a long lasting febrile seizure. In fact, he was dead. The doctors had to stop his heart to get the seizure to stop. It was a very scary thing for us.

It was for Jairus, too. This fear led this member of Jewish orthodoxy to turn to this unorthodox rabbi. This fear drove this proud man to his knees in front of Jesus, begging Him, "My little daughter

is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her so that she may be made well and live.”

Jairus trusted in Jesus to be able to heal this girl of her disease and things seemed to be going well.

As our Gospel lesson indicates, Jesus was distracted for awhile by the crowds pressing in on him and a woman who needed to be healed from a bleeding problem. When the woman was healed and the crowds let up a bit, word came from Jairus' home, “Your daughter is dead.” How that must have struck Jairus like a thunderbolt. His worst fears had been realized. His precious little girl whom he loved and for whom he would do anything was now dead – gone. He probably agreed with the advice of his servants, “Why trouble the Teacher any further?” It's not that he lost faith in Jesus. He simply realized that death was beyond faith. He trusted Jesus to help cure illness, but death? That was beyond anyone's ability.

But Jesus does not leave him. Jesus does not offer condolences. Jesus challenges his faith. He says, “Do not fear, only believe.” A better translation would be, “Stop fearing, only believe.” In other words, he was already afraid. How would he face his wife? How would he put his little girl whom he loved into the ground?

Jesus further challenges his faith when the entourage arrives at Jairus' home. There was a commotion at the house. People were grieving – weeping openly and wailing loudly. Jesus says, “Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead, but sleeping.” The people stop their weeping to laugh at Jesus and mock Him for his stupidity. They knew “dead” and this girl was definitely dead. Jesus' words would either be the height of stupidity or the most wondrous challenge to faith ever.

Along with the parents and Peter, James, and John, Jesus calmly enters the room where the dead girl lies. Jesus touches her - takes her by the hand. Jesus speaks to her and says in Aramaic, “*Talitha cumi*” which means, “Little girl, I say to you, arise.” The word for “arise” is the same word used to describe Jesus rising from the dead. Jesus was saying, “Little girl, I say to you: be resurrected!” And, wonder of all wonders, the little girl – Jairus' precious little daughter – gets up

IMMEDIATELY and begins walking around. Jesus tells them something so common as “give her something to eat.”

Although the text doesn't say it, what joy and amazement must have filled the hearts of Jairus and his wife. Their little girl was restored to life. I'm sure they never took life for granted or looked at death in the same way again. If their biggest problem and greatest fear – death – could be seen as “only sleeping” through the mercy and power of Jesus Christ, why would they ever be afraid again?

There is much we can learn from this story about Jairus because we are much the same. We are proud and self-sufficient people. We don't beg anyone for anything. We can deal with our problems on our own – thank you very much. That is, until the problem is death.

We are so afraid of death that we must find some way to deal with it. Our first strategy in dealing with death is to avoid it all together. We deny its name by referring to it as “passing away”, “passing on”, or, simply “passing.” We deny its grief by not having sad funeral services, but having happy memorial services or, as is the case of many in Montana, no services at all. We deny even its existence by avoiding visiting those who are terminally ill and not attending funeral services, as if somehow death was contagious.

Our second strategy in dealing with death is to postpone it if even we can't avoid it. Many people will pay whatever it takes to keep a loved one alive – expensive medicine, radical surgery, and so on. They will even try non-traditional and unproved procedures – anything so that death will not take their loved one.

Yet, despite our attempts to avoid or postpone death, death continues to stare us right in the face. We cannot stop death. It is the wages for our sin in God's system of justice. We cannot avoid death. All have sinned. All will die. Like Jairus, we become filled with fear when death comes calling, either for a loved one or for ourselves. We lose all pride and feelings of self-sufficiency when confronted by death. We are driven to pray for mercy and help. Death makes pray-ers even of those who don't normally pray.

Yet death happens. There are empty and bitter feelings. We feel that there is no hope. Like those who came to inform Jairus of the death of his daughter, we are tempted to think, “Why bother?” Then comes the call to faith from Jesus, “Stop being afraid. Only believe. This is not death. This is only sleep.”

Now, we can laugh at this call to faith from fear in the midst of death like the friends and family of Jairus did or we can see Jesus touch death and turn it into life. That’s what Jesus did by coming from heaven to earth. He came to touch death. But He did it in a far more in-depth and inclusive way than he did with the daughter of Jairus. He did more than touch death. He experienced death. Jesus took upon Himself the death-causing agent for all people – sin and He let death engulf Him. It seemed as if death had won.

Three days later, God the Father entered the tomb where Jesus lay in death, touched Him, and raised Him from death to life again. This was done quickly and easily, as if Jesus had only been sleeping.

But this is not intended to be an isolated incident. Jesus’ resurrection to life is the first of many. He comes back to life in order to share life. Jesus has touched you in Holy Baptism and made you alive from the death of sin. He speaks to you the words that give life to you. When you hear Him say, “I forgive you all your sins” in the Absolution, it is as if He were saying to all of us, “Young girl...young man...I say to you, arise.” Immediately, we experience new life. And Jesus says to give us something to eat and His servants feed us with His body and blood to strengthen and nourish us in that new life. And, even though our bodies die, we shall be raised to life forever when Christ comes again. St. Paul sums it all up in 1st Corinthians 15:

Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. (1 Cor. 15:20-23)

It was this thinking which changed the attitude of the Church after Jesus' resurrection. They picked up on Jesus' vocabulary when describing death. They did not speak of death, but sleep. Lazarus did not die, but fell asleep (John 11:11). The first martyr, Stephen, did not die, but fell asleep. (Acts 7:60). King David did not die, but "fell asleep." Christians in Corinth did not die, but fell asleep (1 Cor. 11:30). The witnesses to Jesus resurrection were mostly still alive, according to Paul, although some had "fallen asleep." (1 Cor. 15:6).

The early Christians were not stupid, naive or in denial about death. They simply knew the new reality about death. Death has lost its permanency. It is no more permanent than sleep. When you sleep, you lay down, close your eyes, and are unconscious for a period of time. Yet that is not permanent. You always wake up. For the Christian, death is like that. Death is not the last word on our existence. It is but sleep from which Christ will wake us all.

Therefore, death has lost its ability to frighten us. If death is only a temporary mode of existence from which we will wake to a new and more glorious life, then why be afraid? There is no reason to be afraid at all. Although we do not seek death, we do not fear it for it is the gateway to everlasting life.

That is why Jesus could say, "Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead, but sleeping." He knew what death truly was and the life which this child would soon have. Death is real but it is not important any more. It is "only sleeping."

We can have the same confident attitude as we encounter death. We do not deny it but we do not fear it. We can have confidence every time death takes a loved one who dies trusting in Jesus Christ. She is only sleeping. We can have the same confidence when we face death. We will sleep but we will wake to everlasting life.

A well-known children's bed time prayer which we have all learned and said is "Now I lay me down to sleep." One line in that prayer has been criticized as frightful to children: "If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." It is frightening only when death is feared. But when

death is considered no different than sleeping, it is an expression of confidence. “All Praise to Thee My God, This Night”, a familiar evening hymn, expresses this in another way: “Teach me to live that I may dread The grave as little as my bed. Teach me to die that so I may Rise glorious at the awefull day.” That’s the hope by which we live and the assurance with which we die when death is “only sleeping.” Amen.