

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

July 7, 2024, The 6th Sunday After Pentecost/The 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 130, Mark 5: 21-43

“Christ is Lower Still”

If you have ever had a season in your life when you felt like you were walking in a deep, dark, shadowy valley where there was no light, or hope of light, then you know how unhelpful it is for someone to tell you: “It will all be better soon.”

Or someone else will say, “You have so many good things in your life, you shouldn’t be feeling this way.”

Or the worst one of all, “Snap out of it.”

One of the most helpful things that was ever said to me in one of my dark valley times, when I had stopped believing that I would see the light again, was said to me by Sr. Lois, my spiritual director I met with in Duluth over 25 years ago.

I’ve never forgotten her words because I’ve returned to them in other valley seasons in my life, and I’ve handed them on to some of you as well.

Years ago she said to me, “Becky, whenever we get down into the deepest depths of the valley, we will always find that Jesus has gotten there before us, and is waiting for us to arrive. Jesus will sit in the valley with us and bring comfort, love, and healing and help us rise out of the valley.”

Her words were such a gift and turning point in that season of sorrow and depression.

Just recently I discovered another image of Jesus meeting us in the depths. The musical group The Porter’s Gate is a gathering of musicians. If you stream music, I highly recommend their album *Sanctuary Songs*. It’s a favorite of mine. It includes the song *Christ is Lower Still* which begins with these words: “*Breathe in reach out, Touch the hem of Your garment now, Help me heal me, My mind my body and soul*, and then these words in the chorus: *When from grace I fell Christ was lower still. Humbly lowly, Jesus waits in the valley. My Savior suffers with me. With Him I’ll rise again.*” I felt like I’d found a song about the wise words Sr. Lois said to me years ago. In the video for the song that you can find on YouTube I discovered the story of an amazing sculpture that adds to this truth. I highly recommend that you go watch this video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_G5U0NDxdxU

It tells the story that off the coast of Italy, near Portofino there is an 8-foot statue of Jesus that isn’t on land, but is about 56 feet down on the floor or the Mediterranean Sea. The only way to see this sculpture is to dive down into the depths. It was sculpted by Guido Galletti over 60 years ago. As you dive deeper and deeper down into the sea, you come to Jesus with his arms extended up to you, reaching up to you from the depths of the ocean. It is called Christ of the Abyss.

Jesus waits in the valleys, in the abyss, in the deep shadowy places for us.

Before we even get there, Jesus waits in Love for us.

In the words of the song: “Christ is lower still.” Lower than any valley, any abyss, any broken place within us, Jesus is lower still waiting for us.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_of_the_Abyss

The woman in this morning’s story from Mark knew in her heart of hearts, that the only way she was going to be healed was to reach out from her place in the valley, from her place in the depths of the abyss, and reach for Jesus.

12 years of constant menstrual flow kept her separated from all of life. According to the laws of Moses in the book of Leviticus (Lev. 15, cf:19, 25-27) anyone and everything she touched was impure and unclean.

When you were unclean you couldn't worship God in your local church, the synagogue. You also couldn't worship God in the Temple in Jerusalem. And other people couldn't touch you or they would become unclean, including people in your own family.

So, if she sat in a chair, or laid on a bed, and then someone else sat in the same chair, or laid on the bed, they were unclean for seven days, and couldn't go into the church for seven days, or be around other people for seven days. On the evening of the seventh day, they had to bathe and wash all their clothes to be clean again.

The same thing happened if they just brushed against her, or their clothes touched her clothes.

But because her bleeding never stopped, she was always unclean for 12 years.

Imagine how her life was affected by her illness. Not only would her own family not want to be close to her, but in a culture built around village life, none of the neighbors wanted her in their homes and they didn't want to be in her home. They didn't want to be around her, they stayed away from her in the village, at the well, and the market place.

She was feared and despised by the people who called her mother, sister, daughter, wife, and friend. She was completely alone.

Life centered on worship at the local Synagogue and this woman, who was so clearly a woman of faith, couldn't even come to worship to pray and sing with the community. She couldn't hear the scriptures read, she couldn't hear the rabbis teach, she wasn't a part of the community where God met with the people of God.

The picture of her loneliness breaks your heart when you think about it. And as many of us understand, she had spent so much of her money on doctors trying to find answers, until she had no money left and she never got better, and only got worse.

She was a woman alone, living in poverty, living at the far edges of the life that swarmed around her. She lived a walking death, enduring it day after day.

She is a picture of someone who continually walked in the deep shadowy valleys, always alone; she knew the despair of the abyss.

We can imagine her praying Psalm 130 through the tear-filled long hours of the night:

Help, God—I've hit rock bottom!

Master, hear my cry for help!

Listen hard! Open your ears!

Listen to my cries for mercy.

I pray to God—my life a prayer—

and wait for what God will say and do.

My life's on the line before God, my Lord,

waiting and watching till morning,

Then the miraculous day came, when she heard that Jesus was walking through her village. She'd heard the stories about him. She'd heard that he had God's power of healing in his hands and heart. She had nothing left to lose. She had nothing left, her body had become a prison, and she wanted out.

So, she did something she hadn't done in 12 years. She pushed her way into that crowd. She didn't care who she touched; she touched people without a thought for her uncleanness.

All she wanted to do was get close enough to touch the hem of Jesus' robe and she knew that .
that would be enough.

She believed that he was so filled with the power of God that she would be healed.

And it was enough! In that moment that she touched the hem of his robe she was cured; she could feel the change and the unceasing flow of blood stopped.

And Jesus knew that power had gone out from him, even though he was surrounded by the pushing, jostling crowd.

When he asked: "Who touched me?", she knew she needed to say out loud that it was her.

So, she went and knelt at his feet and confessed, and Jesus said: "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

We can barely imagine how her life was changed in that moment. I wish we had her biography in scripture. I'd love to know what happened next.

For those of us who lived through the Covid Pandemic as single people or in assisted living or nursing homes we know what it felt like to finally be hugged by someone after months of no touch.

For those of us who have been ill for a very long time and not able to come to church, we know the great joy of returning to worship with the community of faith. Imagine waiting 12 years, and what that first Sabbath was like!

For those of us who have been separated from loved ones for a long time and finally are reunited with them, we know that overwhelming joy of gathering them in our arms and weeping together. Imagine her reunions with family and friends.

Her courageous faith of reaching for the hem of Jesus' robe changed her life. He named her "daughter," and welcomed her back into the full life of living within the family of God, and the family of her village, and her own family.

This morning her story reaches out into our lives and invites us to take the risk of asking ourselves where we see ourselves in her story. Where in her valley-walking do we see ourselves?

Do you recognize yourself in her long illness?

In her despair?

In her loneliness?

Do you recognize yourself in her separation from family and friends?

In her not being able to attend her church?

In her never getting to leave her home?

Do you recognize yourself in her spending all her money on doctors and never getting better,
but only getting worse,

In her feeling betrayed by her body?

In her longing to be touched and held, to just have another person put an arm around her
shoulder?

In her feeling invisible in plain sight?

Where do you see yourself in this woman's story? Where is she telling your story?

Can you borrow her strength this morning and reach out for the hem of Jesus's love?

Can you trust the words and promise of my spiritual director Sr. Lois that when we are down in the shadowy valleys, that Jesus has arrived before us and is waiting for us?

Or in the words of the song by The Porter's Gate, "Christ is lower still." No matter how low we think we have sunk, Christ is lower still, waiting, always waiting for us with help and healing and love.

This week I was listening to the phone app *Lectio 365* that I listen to each morning, and the presenter said: “A close friend of mine, a wise and gentle leader, went through an extraordinarily painful experience of betrayal and loss. I asked her how she found her way back to joy and she described her journey of healing very simply: ‘I sit in my chair, and allow Jesus to look at me. In His eyes I see love.’”

Lectio 365, June 28, 2024, Sarah Yardley

With the courage of the woman who bled for 12 years, may we dive deep into our broken places, our pain, our sorrow, and our valleys.

As we descend into the truth of those places,
the promises of God’s love are for each one of us.

Christ of the Abyss,

Christ of the empty cross and the empty grave
will be reaching up to us out of the depths,

Christ is lower than any deep valley.

Always waiting for us,

reaching for our hand, always reaching.

Naming us “daughter,” naming us “son,” naming us “child of God.”

Welcoming us Home into healing,

Home in to wholeness,

Home into the Love of Jesus our Savior that has no
end.

Christ is lower still.

It is such a gift; it is such a relief.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia. Amen.

(Note: Next time: Fr. Farrell’s crucifixes)