

Proper 8B 2018 sermon

Mark 5:21-43

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "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." He went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Albert Einstein was in the news again this past week. You may have seen the article titled, "Einstein proved right in another galaxy."¹ Now, I don't pretend to understand *everything* about Einstein's theories, but I *do* have a degree in chemistry and I know enough science to understand certain theories that have stood up to scientific testing for 100 years and more. And one of these time-tested concepts relates to the question of whether light is a particle or a wave. The scientific conclusion? *It depends on what you're looking for.* If you're *looking* for a particle, you'll **find** a particle, not a wave; if you're looking for a wave, you'll find a wave, not a particle. What determines which characteristic

light manifests depends on what **we** try to measure, describe and identify. The minute we try to identify a **particle** of light, its wave characteristics collapse; and the minute we try to identify a light **wave**, its particle properties collapse. By simply *looking for* a light **particle**, we change physical reality: we make the wave characteristic disappear.

And my friends, there is a very similar dynamic in play with us human beings. For the minute we start labeling someone or categorizing someone, we immediately blind ourselves to *other* characteristics and potentials in that person – and, to some degree, we change social reality. And I’m afraid we do it all the time to one another, and to ourselves. At least, I know **I** do.

My friends, names matter. Labels matter. How we choose to see people and characterize them matters. For, as happens when we study light, what we look for is what we find – and other characteristics disappear.

In the book of Genesis, God chooses Abram for his own special purposes. God says to Abram, “No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be **Abraham**, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.”² The name change from Abram to Abraham signaled a total change in Abraham’s life and purpose. And we see similar name changes throughout the Bible, always with a corresponding change in how that person is henceforth to be seen and identified. Jacob “the supplanter” becomes Israel,³ “the Man who Wrestled with God.” Simon the fisherman becomes Peter, “the Rock” on which Jesus will build his Church.⁴ The staunch Pharisee and Jewish purist Saul becomes Paul, a Gentile name to reflect his conversion to becoming the great Christian missionary to the Gentiles.

“Names,” writes Dr. David Lose, “-- especially nicknames that are given by others to describe something about us – can be pretty hard to shake. Whether they are accurate or not, whether we like them or not... the descriptors hung on us [by others] have significant power. Why? Because in naming **one** reality about us – whether true or not – they tend to reduce all of who we are to that one dimension.”⁵ Just as naming **one** of the realities of light collapses its other characteristic.

Which brings us to today’s Gospel passage.

Dr. Lose writes: “[A crowd has gathered around Jesus, and] among the crowd... is a woman. She is given no name. She is described only as a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. Assuming this was most likely vaginal bleeding, that condition would have rendered her both [ritually] impure **and** unable to bear children [*both* of which would open her to scorn in her culture *and* religion]. Which perhaps explains why she is there all alone, hoping just to touch the edge of Jesus’ garment, desperate for even the possibility of healing. She has no

advocate, no family, no community to beseech Jesus on her behalf. She is nothing, just ‘the woman who had bled for twelve years.’

“Yet... Jesus gives her a **new** name, calling her ‘daughter,’ calling her a person of great faith, and naming her healed.

“...Names,” Dr. Lose continues, “– whether nicknames or some other descriptor – are convenient because they work to summarize a lot of things into one element. But they are also dangerous because they reduce us, strip us of our individuality and uniqueness, and label us according to what someone else sees.”⁵

If you are *looking* for a particle, you will **find** a particle; and other characteristics disappear. If you are looking for a *negative* characteristic in another person or group, you will find it, whether true or not; and all *positive* characteristics will seem to disappear.

My friends, we *have* to admit that the practice of *negatively* naming and characterizing one another, and reducing another person or group to one negative label – that practice is out of control in our world today! And let’s be honest with ourselves: it has gotten to the point that it resembles the name-calling and labeling one finds on a grade school playground. But the stakes are much higher, having national and international, even life-and-death, ramifications. A recent article in *Scientific American* reports that there is even a rising trend of people in the United States not wanting to buy a house next to someone of the “other” political party, and parents forbidding their children to *marry* someone of the “other” political party.⁶ Is this the kind of nation our Founding Fathers envisioned when they signed the Declaration of Independence 242 years ago this week, which stated that “all men are created equal?” More to the point, is this the kind of relationships that our Christian faith calls us to have?

When we choose to look at light in one way, the other characteristic disappears. And when we choose to negatively characterize another person or group, *positive* characteristics of that person or group also tend to disappear.

Dr. Lose writes, “Humans are, by nature, social, even tribal, creatures, and so we gather with those who seem *like* us and characterize those who **don’t** as different, naming *them* by some attribute that creates convenient definitions and borders *for us* by stripping **others** of their individuality and labeling and lumping them together.

“And yet the pattern of Christ is exactly the opposite. [As we saw last week,] Jesus is constantly crossing borders – whether geographic or social – to see people for who they are and to draw them into relationship. That’s why the woman who interrupts Jesus’ preaching and healing tour is no longer just ‘woman’ or ‘the one who has been bleeding for twelve years.’ She is now ‘daughter,’ one restored to family and community and health and life.

“This is, of course, Christ’s charge to **us** as well. To see people for who they really are, unique persons, each created in the image of God, and each worthy of our attention, care, love, and respect. Christ calls us to leave the comfortable and familiar behind in order to reach out to others as brothers and sisters, *all* of us children of God.

“Yet let’s be honest,” Dr. Lose continues: “simply *saying* that isn’t enough. We **know** this. We know that... discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or religion or economic status [or sexual orientation or political affiliation] that happens on the streets of cities and towns across the country every single day is also terribly and tragically wrong. We [already] *know* this, and being told once more will probably make little difference.”⁵

But why *is* this? Why is it that we don’t *live out* the teachings of Jesus, which we **all know**?

My own guess is that it’s because we tend to identify more with our political, ethnic, racial, economic, social, or citizenship group than we do with our Christian faith. Let me be a bit vulnerable and give a personal example.

Most of you know that I visited my dad in Chicago two weeks ago. Now, my dad, whom I dearly love, has *always* been a political animal – be it medical politics or civil politics. He now watches a cable news station almost every waking hour of his day, which means that, at the age of 92, he is angry *all the time* – which grieves me deeply. His mailbox is *literally* filled every day with political ads and pleas for money. And since the political controversies of the day *consume* his waking hours, they also consume his conversation. During my recent visit, he tried, as he always does when I stay with him, to get me to see that the world is made up of “us” vs. “them,” and that I should join him in condemning, in every way possible, all who are “them.”

Now, here’s the thing: My dad has **also** *always* attended church every Sunday his whole life. And he taught me and my brothers to do the same - that’s why I am here today, and why each of my three brothers is a faithful member of his own church today. And so I said to him, “Dad, here’s the question: What would Jesus do?” And do you know what he said? “That’s **your** area of expertise. I don’t know about that.” To which I responded, “Yes, Dad, you *do* know it, in your heart.” Each of us does.

My friends, some people, my dad included, *insist* that America is “a Christian nation;”⁷ but I think what they often mean by that is “Christian” as opposed to “Muslim” or “Hindu” – “Christian” as a group identity or even a political stance rather than as a way of life. Yet, as we read a few Sundays ago, Jesus made clear that not even blood-ties to our families – let alone ties to one’s nation or political party – supersede our ties and commitment to God. “Who are my mother and my

brothers?” Jesus asked in our Gospel a few weeks ago. And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”⁸

My friends, this week, as we observe the anniversary of the birth of these United States of America, may we remember to Whom our *highest* allegiance is due. And as Christians, may we look at others no longer as “the woman who bled for 12 years” or “the refugee from the war in Syria (or El Salvador),” or any of the other “loaded” descriptors which we hear all too often; but rather, may we look at “the other” as “daughter” or “son” of God – which is everyone’s most *foundational* identity. For if we truly *are* Christians, then we will see others not in terms of some negative label, but as first and foremost brothers and sisters in Christ, flawed and sinful – as we all are! – yet wonderfully and uniquely gifted by God, for whom our Lord also laid down his life out of love.

AMEN

- 1 <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/06/180621141043.htm>
- 2 Genesis 17:5
- 3 Genesis 32:28
- 4 John 1:42
- 5 from David Lose’s Blog, “...in the Meantime,” *Pentecost 5 B: Known and Named* Posted by DJL on Jun 22, 2015 in *Dear Partner in Preaching*, http://www.davidlose.net/2015/06/pentecost-5-b-known-and-named/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3Adavidlose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29
- 6 https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-identity-not-issues-explains-the-partisan-divide/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=s-editorial-social&utm_content=&utm_term=mind
- 7 “Trump-allied pastor tells worshippers ‘America is a Christian nation,’” <https://www.vox.com/2018/6/25/17502170/pastor-robert-jeffress-america-christian-nation-trump-dallas-baptist>
- 8 Mark 3:33-35

An interesting recent article on “Civility” was published in the Jesuit Magazine *America*: “9 rules for civility from the Catholic tradition,” by David A. Zubik, Roman Catholic Bishop of Pittsburgh, June 26, 2018 https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/06/26/9-rules-civility-catholic-tradition?utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletters&utm_content=14+-+Read+the+full+story&utm_campaign=Newsletter&source=Newsletter