

Proper 8 B June 28, 2009

St. Stephen's Episcopal Church Richmond, VA

Mark 5: 22-24; 35b-43

Thomas Moore, Executive Director, SIM

Take our minds and think through them, our mouths and speak through them, our hearts and SET THEM ON FIRE for Thee, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. AMEN.

It is a delight for my wife, The Reverend Helen Moore, and me to return to St. Stephen's and be with you this morning. For a brief period a couple of years ago, we were regular worshipers here until I was called to Connecticut as Executive Director of the Society for the Increase of the Ministry or SIM as we are known today. SIM has been financially and pastorally supporting Episcopal seminarians, the future ordained leaders in the Episcopal Church for 152 years. Our history of over 5000 grants to seminarians includes one to your rector when he was in seminary at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. Thank you, Gary, for supporting SIM and inviting me here for this opportunity to preach this morning.

In today's Gospel, we heard about the miracle of Jesus' healing of Jairus' daughter, "*Talitha cum, little girl get up.*" Without looking deeper into this Gospel story of a miraculous healing, we might miss how Mark accentuates leadership, religious leadership. Mark's story of Jesus interaction with Jairus and his daughter portrays Jairus as a leader of the synagogue, not once, but four different times.

Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and when he saw [Jesus], 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." So he went with him....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, "Do not fear, only believe."...When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, ... people [were] weeping and wailing....[Jesus] said to them, "Why do you ...weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him.... [Jesus] went in where the child was. ... "Talitha

cum,” which means “Little girl, get up!” And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about.

What is it that Mark sees in Jairus’ leadership that merits such attention? What was it about Jairus as a leader of the synagogue and his relationship with Jesus that enabled his twelve year old daughter’s healing? Could it be that Mark is providing an example of the key attributes of effective Christian leadership?

First, Jairus, leader of the synagogue, was self-aware and wise enough to discern that, even in his position of power, some circumstances were bigger than his capabilities. *Second*, he was willing enough to publicly admit his powerlessness in light of his beloved daughter’s critical situation. *Third*, unlike the religious leader, Nicodemus, who in our gospel a few weeks ago, *came to Jesus by night*, Jairus unashamedly laid out his desperate need for all to see. *Fourth*, Jairus, synagogue authority, respected citizen, man of prominent social status, was humble enough to fall at Jesus’ feet, surrendering enough to beg repeatedly, “*Come and lay your hands on [my daughter], so that she may be made well and live.*” *Finally*, Jairus’ leadership in a desperate situation was fearless enough to follow Jesus and spiritual enough to obey His command, “*Do not fear, only believe.*” Humbling himself; side-stepping his available network; Jairus overcame fear of relinquishing control and thus opened up to the power of belief.

For many of us last-ditch-stand types, we also must reach desperation before yielding our prideful will to God. When Jairus fell at Jesus’ feet, he sought real power, a power beyond his own; a power not fenced in by ritual; not confined by doubt; a real power that produces real outcomes. Jairus ignored the crowd, rejecting use of his advantageous position, to seek the power of God brought to bear in his calamitous situation.

Theologian Karl Barth claims that in essence people come to Church for one thing: the answer to a single, penetrating, fundamental question: Is all this really true? Can we really believe that at the end of our times of darkness and despair, there will be a moment of redemption—a “*Talitha cum.*” “*Little girl, get up!*” conclusion.

Helen and I lived such a moment of redemption. Many years ago, one of our four daughters was deep in the throes of adolescence. In fact, we were quite certain she invented adolescence. Courtney was dead to her Real Self; Courtney was dead to God. It was one of those chapters when parenting had lost its appeal. Helen and I were beside ourselves: desperate and confused, yes,...but humble, no...you see, we were convinced we could handle this family drama on our own, somehow, someday. Grounding Courtney, snatching away the car keys, revoking phone privileges; even dangling carrots of reward...nothing was making matters better.

One stormy afternoon, both outside and within, Courtney's younger sister, Kendall, marched into our room, hands on her hips. "Mom and Dad, just how long do you want this to go on? Send her with me to FOCUS (a Christian camp on Martha's Vineyard that Kendall had attended the previous summer). She'll find what she's really looking for there." Astonished by words of wisdom from a surprising source, with doubt and trepidation, we put our seething teenager and her sister on the ferry bound for Martha's Vineyard.

After her first week, Courtney called, tearfully begging forgiveness. Miraculously, Courtney had become a Poster Child for CONVERSION. Grounded in the camp's Bible Study and counselors' faith talks, Courtney made a gutsy, mature, transformational decision that would forever change the direction of her life. Jesus had laid his hand on Courtney. "*Talitha cum.*" "*Little girl, get up!*" Courtney was no longer "dead" but alive in Christ.

Before Kendall came to us, Helen and I had exhausted all the options we could muster. We had gotten to the point where all we could see in Courtney's situation was "death", not "life". We had become negative like the crowd from Jairus' house: "*Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?*" Younger sister, Kendall, however, became Jairus; unashamedly, willingly, humbly, and wisely directing her parents to realize this problem was bigger than their capabilities. Kendall was spiritual enough to recommend a Divine solution.

In challenging situations of our lives we seek leaders with the qualities of Jairus to guide us to avoid the crowd of derisive, unbelieving naysayers and become fearless believers in the future. We need religious leaders willing to follow Jesus to build our Church. We prayed the Collect assigned for this morning: “Almighty God, you have built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone.” Our ordained leadership matters to us.

As I considered the call to become SIM’s first lay Executive Director, I began to grasp the significance of SIM’s ministry when I realized seminarians are the future ordained leaders of the Church and supporting them financially, pastorally and with advocacy is a ministry that can positively shape the future of the Church. SIM advocates for seminarians in such ways as raising the Church’s awareness to address the crisis of the increased levels of seminarian debt. Such debt that debilitates one’s ministry well beyond seminary years and limits the rich benefits Episcopalians receive from diversity in our ordained leaders. Because our national church, unlike other major denominations, has no office of support for seminarians, SIM particularly impacts the future of the Church as it is the only Episcopal organization on a national basis that raises funds to support seminarians who represent dioceses all across the country.

Investing in the future ordained leaders of our Church gives my call significance, meaning I can believe in. I hope you will review our brochure and realize SIM as a cause you too can believe in.

The door is open for us to embrace Christ’s command to build the Episcopal Church and spread the gospel by supporting leaders who will unashamedly, humbly, wisely, and willingly direct us to by-pass whatever, whoever keeps us standing with the naysaying crowd. We need those leaders who will guide our lives to fearlessly approach Jesus imploring, “Sir...come and lay your hands on us that we might be well and live.” AMEN.