

SERMON TITLE: "Gospel of Freedom: Freedom for Life"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 9:18-26
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 16, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Did you read the news this week about the young woman in Nepal who died from a snakebite? Instead of sleeping in her family's house where she would have been safe, 18-year old Tulasi had been sleeping in forced seclusion in a cowshed. Even though Nepal's Supreme Court spoke against this practice in 2005, and the government has issued guidelines against it, the tradition of forcing menstruating women into seclusion has persisted in some parts of the country. Unfortunately, Tulasi's sad situation isn't unique in Nepal. Less than two months ago, another girl died in the same way, and two Nepali women met the same fate last year.

This tradition, which "has its roots in Hindu taboos," not only exiles women and girls to snake-prone huts with "poor sanitation and ventilation." The tradition also forbids menstruating "women and girls . . . from touching other people, cattle, . . . vegetables, . . . and fruits." They are prohibited from drinking milk, "and their access to water . . . is limited." In some areas, women and girls are also prohibited from "reading, writing, or touching books during" that time of the month. These prohibitions stem from traditional fears of angering the gods and that crops and cattle will die as a result.

Following the recent deaths of young women, some Nepalese are calling for laws against these practices. "Our girls and women are dying, and the state is turning a blind eye," said one prominent Nepali writer and activist. A Women's Development Officer has said that, in addition to an "education program, strict laws are required to tackle this grave problem."¹

This situation in Nepal sounds a lot like the stories in Matthew 9:18-26. There, Jesus encountered a woman with a bleeding problem and a girl who had died. For 12 years, the woman had suffered, probably in silence, just as she stayed silent in this story. The girl, less isolated because she

had an important father, nevertheless would have come to a premature end had not Jesus taken a strong interest. In this July series on the Gospel of Freedom, we've already talked about freedom from paralysis and freedom for mercy. Today, as we move further into Matthew chapter nine, let's see how Jesus provided a woman and a girl freedom for life.

First of all, Jesus offered freedom for life by caring about a needy and under-served population. Women didn't get much positive attention back then, and here's a rare little section of scripture in which Jesus took time for both a woman and a girl on the same day. Those interactions were significant enough that the male gospel writer included their stories. Jesus' caring attitude was the beginning of these freedom-for-life stories.

Secondly, we see that Jesus offered freedom for life by speaking a life-affirming message. If we look closely at what Jesus said to the woman with the hemorrhages, we see that Jesus' simple sentence was jam-packed with positives of hope and help. When the woman came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, and Jesus turned and saw her, he didn't react as might have been expected. A typical Jewish man might have recoiled from such a woman because she would have been considered unclean. A religious man would have been offended and put out because he would have then had to take the time to go through purification rituals himself. But Jesus didn't feel violated by this woman's desperate attempt to improve her life. Jesus didn't react in distress, anger, or fear. He didn't worry about how much this woman's neediness cost him, or how much it set him back.

Instead, Jesus spoke positive, life-affirming words to her. *He encouraged her by saying, "Take heart."* With that very first utterance, Jesus opened up to the woman a glimmer of hope. Even before anyone knows whether or not she will be healed of her bleeding, Jesus signaled to her that she could claim courage. She could cheer up. She had come to the right person. Jesus would be sympathetic to her need.

I love this presumption of hope and help that comes to us from God. I'm sure you know some people who have a default attitude of negativity. Maybe because of early traumatic life experiences, they have come to expect and presume that each situation and person they encounter is going to be bad. They consider that, if someone is having problems, then, well, it's because they did something wrong, that it's their own fault. Well, Jesus wasn't that way. When people came to him in need, Jesus most often presumed that they had already done what they could to help themselves, that they truly wanted to be healed, that they came to him because they had faith, and that they just needed some extra help. What they needed most was a message that would liberate them from suffering and free them for life.

In the United Methodist Church and our Wesleyan theological tradition, we talk a lot about grace. One of those kinds of grace is called "prevenient grace." That's the kind of grace that "comes before." It comes before we're even born, overcoming the original sin that is inherent in our human condition. Ever since the time of Adam and Eve, human beings have been born with limitations and failings. Call it genetic. Call it environmental. Or call it something else we haven't even figured out yet. But we know that our minds, hearts, and bodies have problems. We have physical and spiritual weaknesses that are like built-in obsolescence. It's how we were designed. No matter how hard we try, we can't help it. But God can, through the grace offered to us in Jesus Christ. And, so, right here, in his very first utterance to this suffering woman, Jesus encouraged her with grace and hope.

Jesus' life-affirming message of freedom was more than just the first word or two, however. *He went on to call her "daughter."* Like the other, younger daughter in this two-part story, Jesus wanted to communicate that this older woman was also loved. She, too, was someone's precious child. By using this familiar language, Jesus was drawing her nearer to himself. Instead of pushing her away, instead of putting an emotional barrier between them, or instead of hurrying away himself, Jesus used this life-affirming message of family solidarity to draw her into a closer relationship with himself.

Can you imagine how freeing it must have felt to that woman to have Jesus call her, “daughter”? After 12 years of hemorrhaging, this woman may have been all alone. That’s a long time for other people to put up with your chronic illness. But Jesus didn’t leave her alone. By calling her “daughter,” Jesus signaled to her that he would offer her compassionate help. She had an advocate. She could trust in this freedom for life.

But there was even more to Jesus’ life-affirming message. After Jesus said, “Take heart, daughter,” *he told her that her faith had made her well.* We Christians always struggle with the correlation of faith and wellness because we think that could also mean the opposite: that our lack of faith is what makes us sick. But Jesus didn’t say that here, and Jesus implied no put down to anyone. The message he was conveying was, simply, that the woman’s faith played a part in her healing. Kudos to her! Beaten down and discouraged by a 12-year long illness, that woman needed every affirmation she could get, and Jesus gave her this one. Way to go, girl! You pressed on through all your troubles to seek help from Jesus, and you did well.

That’s the life-affirming message that Jesus was offering to the woman. She needed healing for her body but also for her spirit, and this was the spirit part of that healing. Look at you! You’re not a sick woman—weak, defiled, and unholy. You’re a woman of powerful, life-affirming faith!

Can you imagine the look on her face as she heard Jesus’ words? Jesus wasn’t just doing some sweet-, fast-, fancy-talking psychosomatic trick. There was real healing going on. But don’t we all feel a whole lot better when someone says something nice to us? When someone compliments us? When someone notices how hard we’ve worked? When someone points out our strengths and gifts? Don’t those kind words of affirmation bring a smile to our faces and lift up our droopy shoulders? Yes, by speaking a life-affirming message, Jesus gave the woman freedom for life.

Jesus gave that woman wonderful healing attention. **And then he had to get on his way to the girl, even though Jesus had been told that she was already dead.** Our minds can go all kinds of places

with this part of the story. Did the father and the mourners just *think* the girl was dead, when she wasn't really? Was she actually comatose, and then came out of it? Were they saying the word "dead" metaphorically, like when we say someone is spiritually or emotionally dead or when, in some cultures, parents might say that their wayward child is "dead" to them? Or was the writer of Matthew's gospel telling a faith-filled story that put flesh on the Christian belief that, someday, after we die, Jesus will raise all of us up to new life?

There's no way for us to know. Two thousand years later, all we have here in Matthew 9 is an affirmation by the gospel writer that Jesus took this girl by the hand, and she got up. And again, Jesus' life-affirming words were important. When Jesus used the word "sleeping" instead of "dead," he changed the environment around the daughter from pessimism to optimism. Whatever was wrong, Jesus gave her another chance. With his caring presence, Jesus raised that girl from her slumber of death and gave her freedom for life.

CONCLUSION

A hymn I learned many years ago goes like this:

Christ, the blessed one gives to all wonderful words of life.
Sinner, list to the loving call, wonderful words of life!
All so freely given, wooing us to heaven.
Beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life!²

May we both hear and speak the wonderful gospel message that gives freedom for life!

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/10/asia/nepal-menstruation-hut-deaths-outrage/index.html>

²Philip P. Bliss, "Wonderful Words of Life," 1874.