

Choose to Challenge
Matthew 9:18-26
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Wilton Presbyterian Church
Lent Week 4: March 14, 2021

This past Monday was International Women's Day. It's been celebrated for well over a century, beginning in 1911. The theme for this year is "Choose to Challenge." The website, internationalwomensday.com says "A challenged world is an alert world and from challenge comes change. So, let's all choose to challenge."

The scriptures for this morning provide an amazing canvas to do just that... The stories here of a young girl who at first mentioned had died and a woman in her menstruating years seeking healing are fascinating stories of how Jesus blasts open gender stereotypes, established roles and religious customs... to see the person for who she is and to bring healing and reignite the imagination for all those around. Jesus was about seeing things in a new way. He always thought outside of the box! And he asks his followers to do the same.

Years ago, when I was still in seminary, I preached on this text. It's such a powerful set of stories, and I felt it needed more than just intellectual engagement. It needed embodiment. So, I created a first-person sermon of the woman who had lived with her unceasing menstrual cycle for 18 years... and all the implications of that condition. In her culture, it would have meant that she was separated for her ritual uncleanness. I would imagine that the isolation and loneliness that she must have felt would have left her desperate and even perhaps with a sense of self-loathing for 18 long years because of a condition at no fault of her own. Perhaps she even embraced a deep sense of shame. Could it have been that she didn't think she was worthy of having a different life? Could it have been

that she was having to just accept life and the customs that her condition, which was so human, handed her?

But something in her... was alive and had hope.

Somehow, some way, she found the inner imagination that things could be different. There was some life spring of possibility which welled up within her to give her the courage... no, the internal mandate to push through the crowds and approach Jesus that day... only to touch the fringe of his cloak. Here in Matthew, Jesus stops (remember he's in the midst of a busy crowd with people clawing at him... but he stops and notices and going against all of the cultural and religious norms, says, "Take heart daughter, your faith has made you well." In that moment, he acknowledged her agency in bringing about her own healing.

Let's stop for a moment and let that sink in...

When I preached that sermon in the chapel at Princeton Seminary, and then again in Scarsdale and at Presbytery... I followed it with an interpretative dance of the woman, wrapping myself with a long red cloth... right there in the sanctuary. I danced it to Sarah Brightman singing Andre Lloyd Weber's "Pie Jesu."

It shocked people each time I did it... but that was precisely the point... to get people out of their heads and into their imaginations and their bodies as to what this must have been like for her before and after this incredible life-opening experience.

But this story doesn't stop there. There is a role for men too. The other story from this morning addresses the need for advocacy on behalf of women by men who can use their power and influence for good. In this case, it was a father who happened to be a leader in the synagogue, acting on behalf of his adolescent daughter. He didn't care what others would think. At that point, his daughter had died. People were there to

And so this week, I invite you being to play with creating a “different picture” from any brokenness you have lived and felt. Even the brokenness which we have focused on in these past few weeks.

I invite you consider the pieces of beach glass, which may appear cloudy, but when they sit in water, become clear and shiny again. Even when the raw materials of our lives that we have to work with feel broken, we can get a new perspective that can awaken a new vision for life within us.

Each week we look at the reaction of the crowd in the healing story. This week there is an interesting reaction at Jesus’ notion that the girl was not dead. They laughed. Full-blown funeral rites had begun, flutes and all. And yet Jesus said, this is not the end of this story. The idea that we could come back to life better than before, that we could find some way to bring life back to what feels dead, may seem preposterous to some at this point. Laughable. But, like Jesus, we need not be deterred. Can we forge ahead, enter the “house” of sorrow and dare to proclaim that life can still exist? Even a better life?

And so in our communal discerning about how this church community could continue its presence as a healing place through our ministry and mission, let us put our minds to imagining how we can learn about innovative ways that are being created to revive our communities. Who are the bright spots of life among us, among our civic, political, neighborhood organizing leaders that are working passionately to alleviate the devastating effects of the pandemics that have raged among us? I invite you to explore with us the possibilities for a new or renewed commitment to a contribution we can make at Wilton Presbyterian Church as we go forward and recover from this past year.

Please be in prayer as Zack plays our morning anthem.

May it be so... Alleluia, Amen!