

“Abundant Blessing”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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“If I could, I would take this pain from you and make it my own, so that you wouldn’t feel any hurt.” My father used to say these words to me whenever I was hurt as a young child. When I began in ministry, I had some sad occasions when I would stand at the children’s hospital with worried parents; once it was by a hospital bed-- no, a crib, really, and the daughter in it would never have fully functioning kidneys. I’ve visited other daughters, and sons too, children and youth who had an illness that you could not detect in the body, but their mental health left them at least as unwell as a failed kidney.

So I can picture the concern on Jairus’ face when he called Jesus to attend to his sick daughter. Jesus had just crossed to the other side of the sea when Jairus, leader of the synagogue, asked Jesus, with great urgency, “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.”

We don’t know whether Jairus was among those Jewish leaders who actually respected and even followed Jesus and his bold teachings. Or, perhaps, Jairus had reached the point of desperation where he would try *anything* to save his daughter-- even if it meant reaching out to the very man who courted the wrath of the Temple *and* of the Roman authorities.

It’s amazing what parents will turn to when they are trying to save or heal the children they love. They want to do whatever they can to make the hurt go away. The thing is, sometimes what a parent *thinks* will save a child may only increase their pain. Once I had a girl in my church youth group, named Taylor. Taylor had been born in India, and was adopted by her white parents-- who loved her very much. However, Taylor’s mom told me, when Taylor was in the 7th grade, that Taylor was having trouble making friends. Some of the girls at school-- white girls, who she had grown up going on play dates with-- had been making fun of Taylor because of her race and because she was adopted. So, Taylor was playing with a group of black girls. Still, her mom kept trying to arrange outings and sleepovers with these white girls. “I want Taylor to know she is just as good as those girls!” the mom told me with determination.

“Wait, you want to show Taylor she is just as good as these girls... *who make fun of her* because of who she is?” I asked the mom. “How about showing her she’s better than them, or at least better than their behavior? Besides, it sounds like Taylor has made a pretty wonderful group of friends-- these black girls she is hanging out with seem to like her and accept her for who she is. They may not look like the group of girls *you* feel most comfortable with, but Taylor is comfortable with them. You can be proud of Taylor for making such quality friends.”

I have also known parents who tried to love their queer kids by pushing them toward identities that just aren’t who they are called to be. They sincerely want to do right by their kids, but they

have not yet learned what boundaries love can push us through. I worked in Atlanta in a street outreach program with homeless youth, and we found that over 80% of the youth and young adults we met were ones who had been pushed away from their families and out of their homes due to lack of acceptance of their sexual or gender identities. Last week I went with my family to stay at Ocean Grove on the Jersey Shore. Ocean Grove is a quirky little town, formed in 1869 by the Methodist Camp Meeting Movement, with fiery preachers from the Second Great Awakening fueling its growth. Still today, platform tents in the original style fill several streets of Ocean Grove, as well as grand victorians homes. Our second day there, we realized a big revival was happening that same weekend. I even had dreams while I slept there that I was preaching in a big revival. Curious about what that was like, we peeked into the great auditorium, which seats 7,000. It was full. I asked the usher for a program and flipped through it while sitting on the much quieter porch of our B&B. No surprise-- all 20-something preachers were men, and one of the advertising sponsors was a program called "Out of Egypt", which is a gay-conversion ministry, I saw from their website. If not for the many homes in Ocean Grove that hung rainbow banners from their windows and claiming queer space, I would have been ready to skip town!

I do not doubt that parents who send their kids to such programs love their children. They want to know their kids will be *made well*-- just as Jairus wanted his ailing daughter to be made well. But the Greek word in the gospel used here-- *sozo*--could also be translated as "save," "heal," "preserve," or "rescue." And it shows up repeatedly in the passage, blurring any distinction between "salvation," "health," "wholeness" and "thriving."¹ I have seen for so many that, contrary to their parents' fears, claiming their identities such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender has brought them to fullness of life and love; it has helped them become the people God has called them to be. For some, it has brought them-- like Jairus' daughter-- from death into life.

Too often we hear about all the bad things that can happen to queer people. We hear about discrimination. We hear about homeless LGBTQ youth. We hear about violence against transgender women. We hear about religious exclusion. We hear about the intersecting oppressions if you are a person of color and queer. And these experiences, these people, deserve our compassion and our advocacy. But let me tell you, there is lots of good news too!

Some people have read the long saga of the troubled ruler Saul, and his son Jonathan, and the young David who would become the king to replace Saul. They see that twice in the bible, David proclaims his great love for Jonathan, saying, "your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women" and recognize perhaps a queer kinship in him. David was many things, good and bad, but I wonder if he had some kind of queerness that made him especially open to create poetic and musical artistry, which we see in many of the Psalms we recite today. And while he made many mistakes in family life, his faithfulness to God made him a renowned leader in Jewish memory, and an ancestor to the one Christians know as the Messiah.

¹ "Get Up: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Fifth Week After Pentecost"

“Daughter, your faith has made you well,” Jesus told the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. LGBTQ people have some of the most incredible faith you can imagine. Like the hemorrhaging woman who reaches for her healing, these folks have reached beyond conventional boundaries for what makes them and their love feel whole. The woman in the story would have been considered ritually untouchable. Jewish law has lots of taboos around blood, including for menstruating people. It’s not just an issue of cleanliness or purity. This taboo holds a recognition of how sacred and powerful blood is. It can both give life, and it can carry life away. When someone gives birth, they must enter a period of separation, bearing the impurity of the symbolic forces of death-- which may seem ironic after pushing life into the world through one’s own body. Rabbi Lauren Eichler Berkun notes that there is a recognition that in bringing life into the world, we are also bringing a new, eventual death into the world as well.

But the hemorrhaging woman wouldn’t be stopped with death. She reached for her life-- beyond taboos, beyond gender norms, beyond what is deemed polite and acceptable behavior. We can almost hear a collective gasp among those in Jesus’ entourage as he headed to Jairus’ house; on his way to one with great religious authority, he was stopped by someone with *no* religious access. He feels the transfer of power when she reaches for the hem of his cloak. Her bleeding immediately stopped, and Jesus proclaimed “Daughter, *your* faith has made you well.” Jesus did not say “*I*” made you well. For it was in *her* audacious reaching that she found the blessing of healing, wholeness, salvation, thriving.

Was it too late for the other daughter? “Don’t bother, she’s already dead,” the people said of Jairus’ daughter. I wonder if resentment was starting to brew, that Jesus would choose this woman from the margins for healing, over the healing of the daughter of the highly regarded priest.

But here’s the thing about God’s love, and about Jesus’ mercy. It is not a zero-sum game. In order for one group to be loved, saved, or healed, it does not require that another group suffer. In order for one person to have life, someone else doesn’t have to have death. God’s love is so bountiful, there is always more than enough to go around-- if we do as the reaching woman did, and have the audacious nerve to put our faith in abundance rather than scarcity.

Twelve years of life in one daughter. In an older daughter, 12 years of bleeding. Maren Tirabassi writes, “It takes tremendous faith to be hidden and exposed all at the same time, and reach out for the passing coat of some teacher, coach, therapist, pastor, hospice visitor, sponsor, parole officer, old friend, stranger in the shelter.

The world thinks Jesus is gone, but we know he left his wardrobe, and we go out into the road ready to meet just these people with so much bleeding and so much faith—in our second-hand clothes.”