

“It’s a Reach”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

June 30, 2024

---

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

Mark 5:21-43

What significant things have you seen in the past twelve years? What changes have you seen in your life in the past twelve years?

A lot can happen in twelve years’ reach of time. Twelve years is a lot of time. In the past twelve years, I have lived in two states and 4 homes. I have worked two jobs. I have seen 3 different US presidents. I have buried an uncle, a cousin, and my own mother. I have baptized (I think) 10 people in this church, babies and older children, as well as 5 people at Teaneck Presbyterian Church, and 6 at my Oak Park church. In twelve years, we have survived a deadly pandemic– it has really only been just over 4 years, but that first year alone felt like 12. In the last 12 years I have joined protests against gun violence, marches for queer rights, rallies for immigration justice, vigils to stop Asian hate; I have demonstrated for Black Lives Matter and I’ve joined millions on the National Mall to speak up for women’s rights and reproductive freedom. In 12 years, I have witnessed laws that speak to each of these issues and the human life behind them shift with each political whim. Twelve years ago, my marriage was not considered legal; now it is. Twelve years ago, the whole country protected the right to choose reproductive freedom as belonging to a patient and their doctors. Today, many states do not allow this right. A lot can happen in twelve years. Twelve years is a lot of time.

For twelve years, a woman in the fishing village of Capernaum suffered with constant vaginal bleeding. At one time, she was a woman of at least some wealth. But she had spent every coin she held on many physicians who could not cure her. Ritually speaking, she could not even enter the synagogue where people prayed, because her bleeding rendered her

ritually impure. Not only that; any other person who touched her while she bled would also be considered ritually impure too, and would have to enter the *mikvah* ritual bath before being able to enter ritual life again. Twelve years of bleeding. Twelve years of loneliness. Twelve years is a very long time, an especially long time for being untouchable.

For 12 years, my very good friend Tara was married to Luci, and they had two young children, and had built a life together in Brooklyn, until Tara— an Ironman triathlete— died very suddenly of cardiac arrest while training. For 12 years, I have raised a tiny infant into a 7th grader who is now just a few inches shorter than I am. She is about to go to sleepaway camp for a week, and that is about the amount of time I am ready to relinquish her before I am ready to have her back and feel her energy fill our home and my heart.

Twelve years is not *nearly* enough time to share a love partnership. Twelve years is not nearly enough time to be a parent.

12 years is about the time that David and Jonathan were friends and had a special kind of love, before Jonathan died.

12 years is the age of a girl, who had not even reached her monthly bleeding but lay at the point of death from some unknown illness.

12 years is not nearly enough time to have and to hold the person you love: a friend, a lover, a daughter, a child. Twelve years is not a lot of time at all.

For Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, when his little daughter lay at death's doorway, he was ready to do anything to prevent the loss of his beloved child. The Greek word Jairus uses for this child means a prepubescent girl who has not yet reached legal adulthood, which in the culture of the time was in the middle of the year between 12-13. As a parent of a child the same age, I can only begin to imagine the grief and urgency Jairus must have felt to seek healing for this beloved daughter— even enough to call out to Jesus, whom other Jewish leaders followed with

suspicion and anger. He reached beyond their prejudices to follow his heart's longing, that his daughter be restored to life.

For a bleeding woman, whose name we do not know but whose reach should inspire us all, twelve years was *too* long. Today, many products exist for people when they bleed: pads, tampons, period underwear, and cups— just to name a few things, but that was not the case in Jesus' time. Did you know that a black woman, Mary Beatrice Davidson Kenner, invented the sanitary belt, which was the precursor to the maxi pad? If you look at any ad for menstrual products from that time, you only see white women, and the commercials demonstrating absorbency used a blue liquid— nothing to remind consumers of the iron-rich, strong reality of blood, and the words period or menstruate could not even be spoken on TV. Then, as in biblical times, blood was considered so powerful that people were afraid of it, and interacting with blood left a stain of contamination— particularly if it was coming from a woman.

And so, this woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years was not just weak from loss of blood and iron. Her bleeding represented a power or life force escaping. Even Jesus felt this shift of power; when he did not see the woman he still felt something *change* in him when she reached for his robe, and asked, "*Who touched me?*" The woman— who immediately was healed of her disease after touching Jesus' robe, knelt before him and told him the truth of her bleeding, and of her healing.

"Daughter," he called her— this woman who 12 minutes ago had been untouchable— "your faith has made you well." Perhaps this woman's faith and witness taught Jesus how powerful blood can be, and gave him the courage that even in his body, his blood and weakness and even his death, he could make a powerful reach, too.

Last week, the young David made a powerful reach to slay the giant Goliath with just a river stone. Today's scripture comes about 12 years later in David's life. David went on to become a warrior in Saul's military ranks and was so successful that he outshined his king. When Saul and David

would come home from battle, the women would come, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. And the women sang to one another as they made merry,

*“Saul has killed his thousands and David his ten thousands.”* Saul’s response to David was complicated, and it ranged from gratitude and dependence, to insecurity and madness. He fell into a murderous rage, and several times tried to kill by sending him on the most dangerous military missions; when that did not help, he tried to kill David directly with his spear.

Saul’s son Jonathan protected David many times from his father’s jealous and murderous rage. In fact, Jonathan and David shared a love that seems like something even *more* than friendship in their 12-year relationship. At first, scripture says that “David loved him as he loved his own life.” They kiss each other— and though in middle eastern culture, people of the same gender commonly share the physical intimacy of a kiss— David and Jonathan also made a covenant that God will bind them one to another, and their descendents to one another as well. The battle against the Philistines that brought Saul to his death— by falling on his own sword— also killed Saul’s son, Jonathan, whom David loved. At Jonathan’s death, David sings, “greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.” 12 years was not *nearly* enough time for David and Jonathan to share their love.

It’s a reach, you might say, to ‘ship David and Jonathan together- after all, they were each married to women. But queer people for many years have read between the lines and understood David and Jonathan to be part of our family. It takes persistence, but there is power when we name ourselves and boldly bring forth who we are— even when others lurk about intent on doing us harm, as Saul did for David. You miss out on knowing the beautiful rainbow diversity God puts around us when you assume everyone is straight and cisgender unless you hear otherwise.

There was a period of time when I attended every Pride March, which in most cities happens the weekend closest to the anniversary of the Stonewall riots of 1969, when patrons of the Stonewall Inn— with black, trans people at the forefront— stood up to police raids, beatings, and arrests, and propelled the nation into a wider movement for LGBTQ rights.

This year I will not march in a big city parade. There was a time— up to twelve years ago, when my marriage was not legally recognized, and my ordination held no standing in the Presbyterian church because of who I love— when marching at Pride was not optional because our lives were on hold or even at stake. There was a time when coming out to someone in a hostile environment, and then experiencing warmth and affirmation from that person, felt *sacramental*. Marching could bring about anything unexpected, audacious, even, as drag queens pushed the boundaries of convention and challenged our assumptions. Adjusting to such surprises taught us to have a faith and a welcome that is flexible, too, because the Spirit will move people how the Spirit moves them, and it is not in our control. The boundary pushing that happens at a Pride march inspires us to reach beyond what we think might be possible, just as a group of people did at Stonewall 55 years ago.

My Pride weekend this year has been spent chatting with neighbors at our suburban block party, cheering at our kid's soccer game, and after church today we will be bringing her back to church camp for the week. I love it that I no longer have to be in a gay bar or at the Pride march in order to feel like I can be authentically me, and feel right in my own skin. Whereas once a Pride march only happened in the biggest of cities, now our little borough of Leonia has an annual Pride event, which we celebrated earlier this month. Today, I feel acceptance at church, in my neighborhood, with my wider family... even at church camp, where last week a row of queer teens hugged each other as they sang about Jesus' love for them in our closing songs.

But as comfortable as I may be, I know a younger generation is still stretching, reaching for the healing that will transform their communities into safe and accepting ones. I know that lives are still at stake. And I know that the next 12 years could bring a reversal of the comfort and safety I know now.

But twelve years is about the amount of time it took, from about 1981 when public health officials noticed a mysterious illness killing gay men in New York and California, to the early 1990's, when medications had advanced enough so that a diagnosis of AIDS was no longer a death sentence. A lot of people died in those 12 years, globally. And without the *fierce* advocacy of queer people and allies insisting on their survival and their sacred worth, how many more lives would have been lost? In a sense, their brave and persistent witness invoked the power of Christ to bring back the dead— just as Jesus did with Jairus' daughter.

As we learned from the debate last week, 12 years could be a short amount of time for a lot of things to happen. 12 years can also be a long amount of time for nothing to happen. How will we let these next 12 years pass us by? For some of us, we may not even live to see 12 more years in this lifetime, before coming to know the secrets of God and the deep peace of eternal rest in God's care. For those of us who will remain, we will be welcoming new life and new love into our midst, as well as struggles of our own, both inside and outside of our reach. 12 years is a lot of time, and we must make each moment count in our reach for life, for love, for healing of ourselves and for the world. 12 years will also be gone before we know it. Is there something that the spirit has put within you to desire for your own or the world's healing? What is keeping you from reaching out to grasp that healing and that salvation and to bring it near?

Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer God, We come before you this morning with full hearts, with joys and sorrows all mixed up together. We rejoice in the beauty and miracle and majesty of creation. We rejoice in the simple pleasures of summer's rhythms. We rejoice in this community of faith, in the love we have for one another, in the service we provide to our neighbors, and in the faith we express in you, God. Alongside all this rejoicing, God, we grieve too. We lift up in prayer those for whom this week has brought not blessing but curse: those who have been ridiculed, hurt, lost, or lonely. We pray for the victims of natural disaster and famine and war and violence. We pray for those whose work brings them into harm's way — emergency personnel, soldiers, mediators, activists. We pray for those who seek peace in the face of overwhelming hate. And we pray for those who need our love the most, and ask you bring us to them. We are grateful for the privileges we have in this country, God — for the freedom to vote and worship, for access to education and medical care. Help us to remember that a privilege is not a blessing until it is shared, and help us to bless our country. We pray for those here and around who live under persecution from their governments, who suffer from limited resources and blatant corruption. Give us eyes to see beyond mere statistics to our real human siblings who need our compassion. We pray for those who are sick today, who need your healing touch. We pray especially for those suffering illnesses the world would often rather not acknowledge — for those who experience stigma and shame from their community rather than support and healing. We rejoice in the work of doctors, nurses, therapists, researchers, technicians, and all others in the medical profession who seek to bring health and comfort to those in any kind of pain. Risen Lord, we remember with joy and with sorrow those who have died. We admit freely that we grieve, missing those whom we loved, wanting their presence in our lives. Yet we also confess that we rejoice, knowing that they are with you, grateful for their example in our lives. We remember the string of witnesses who have brought us to this place, the faithful of the ages who have served you and built up your church. We rejoice that one day we shall join them in forever singing to the glory of your saving name. We pray especially this day for... [petitions of the congregation may be added here] We bring these and all other prayers in our hearts to you, O God, giving infinite thanks for the gift of prayer, for the fact that you listen when we cry and when we sing, that you abide with us every day of our lives. We give thanks for the simple prayer that Jesus taught us...

