



Pentecost 6 – Proper 8 (B)

Life-Giving Force

[RCL] Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15; 2:23-24; Lamentations 3:21-33 or Psalm 30;
2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

Think for a moment of someone in your family, your church, or your community who has died from an overdose. Recently, a 27-year-old who had been clean for five years and was poised to graduate from college in December used heroin one last time, which cost him his life. His death sparked outrage in the Native American community where he lived. Drug dealers know when checks are distributed by the tribal authorities and show up to distribute their poison accordingly.

In light of that tragic death, which is representative of many others, we hear this declaration from the Old Testament lesson from the Book of Wisdom:

God didn't make death.

God takes no delight in the ruin of anything that lives.

God created everything so that it might exist.

The creative forces at work in the cosmos are life-giving. (Common English Bible)

God didn't make death... okay... but we sure do experience it, don't we?

Our sacred narrative doesn't provide a clear origin story to explain death. The Wisdom writer suggests the devil got envious of God. Other strands in our tradition interpret Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden as the reason death got into what would have been paradise.

It can be helpful to differentiate between two kinds of death: There is biological death, something most of us fear, and all of us will experience as the final part of our earthly life.

And then there is death in the spiritual realm, death as a symbol of evil, a force that opposes goodness, abundant life, and wholeness. In our baptismal covenant, we acknowledge this death-dealing force by

asking our baptismal candidates to renounce “the spiritual forces of wickedness,” the “evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God,” and the “sinful desires that draw [a person] away from the love of God.”

This young man’s death is particularly sad because it was the “spiritual forces of wickedness,” those “evil powers... which corrupt and destroy,” that led to what would be his biological death. Death upon death.

So, if God didn’t make death, as the author of Wisdom claims, then why does God allow it? This, my friends, is a great mystery that humans cannot answer, not fully, not satisfactorily.

However, our faith is clear about God’s *response* to death. God’s response to the death force is a person: Jesus, *God with Us*. God’s response is to enter into our world, where there is destructive poison – whether the literal poison of opioids or the metaphorical poisons that incapacitate our native goodness, that interrupt our intentions to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves. Through Jesus’ humanity, God *enters* into the world with us, *accompanies* us through it, and, at the end, *carries* us across Jordan into the Promised Land, into the real-er reality of eternal life.

Jesus is the embodiment of the creative, life-giving force. In fact, Jesus is the creative force; he is the Word through whom all things came to be.

But in case that seems abstract, we get very concrete examples of what happens when that creative, life-giving force is loosed on the world in the Gospel of Mark. Last week, Jesus tamed the forces of nature at the end of chapter 4. Then, in chapter 5, in the verses we skip, Mark tells us about a man so fearsome, so threatening, so possessed by demons, that his community chained him to tombstones to try to contain him. Talk about the death force in action! Jesus saw him from a distance and commanded the death force to leave him. That force entered pigs – you remember this story? And the townsfolk were so freaked out by the creative, life-giving force in their midst, that they asked Jesus to leave – ASAP.

And that brings us to today’s story. Jesus heads back across the lake and the crowd is waiting at the shore. The crowd wants what each of us wants most deeply: Grace. Grace: Unmerited goodness or favor. Grace: Love in action. Grace: There is always more of it; it abounds, it’s amazing, it never ceases. And it just pours out of Jesus, an unlimited supply. In Jesus, God chose to surround himself with our sicknesses, our problems, our pettiness, our fear and just kept on pouring out grace upon grace. And when it seemed like the death force was just about to stop him, Jesus poured even more grace out through his blood on the cross, blood that is shared with us when we take Holy Communion, so that some of that creative life-giving force of the cosmos enters into each one of us.

This life-giving force is available for us if we are well-heeled and respected in the community, like the synagogue leader, Jairus. This life-giving force is available for us if we are so unimportant in the world’s

eyes that the scribes don't bother recording our name, like the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. (But you know, it doesn't matter – Jesus took time to hear the whole truth, and he knew her name!)

This life-giving force seems to be especially available to us when we are at the point of ultimate desperation, our wits' end, and our pretenses and protective mechanisms and ego shields come down. When we are so ashamed, all we can do is reach out to Jesus and hope not to be noticed. Or when we fling ourselves at his feet, making a scene in front of the whole town, begging like Jairus. The life-giving, creative force at work in the cosmos is available to us, finds us in our shame, and listens to our whole truth. That woman mentioned earlier wasn't only cured of her physical ailment; she was healed from her shame and reminded of her dignity, that she – just as much as Jairus and his 12-year-old daughter, and just as much as the Gerasene Demoniac, and just as much as each person who has died too soon from an overdose – was, as the Common English Bible says it, the “perfect representation of God's unique identity,” made to “live forever.”

You see, in Christ, there is no death. Jesus gives us perfect healing, wholeness, and the gift of eternal life – but often, we have to wait for it (it was 12 years for the bleeding woman whose name only Jesus knows), and surely the time it took for her to tell the “whole truth” to Jesus probably felt like 12 years for the desperate father, Jairus. But friends, as we wait, maybe we can hear that Jesus' words to Jairus are actually for us: “Don't be afraid, just keep on trusting.” Or, when we can't hear those words, someone else in the church, someone who is holding us up in prayer can.

But here is even more good news, friends. We – and *you* in particular – are part of this creative, life-giving force of the cosmos because we are Christ's Body on earth. We steward a portion of Christ's immeasurable grace. We receive grace, and then God entrusts us with influencing where some of that grace goes! Now, God knows, everyone needs it – from the privileged synagogue leader Jairus to the woman whose name only Jesus knows, but let's face it: the world is stingy toward the poor. We spread God's grace where it can affect salvation, healing, and wholeness, especially in places most people don't want to go, where the death force is strong, like the tombs where the Gerasene Demoniac was chained up, or among those caught in intergenerational poverty, or among those who are addicted to poison first offered as candy. It is to those places, where we steward and let loose a portion of the creative, life-giving force within each of us. Thus, we participate in, perpetuate, and promulgate that live-saving grace that flows from, in, and through Jesus – grace that never runs out, not even in the face of death. Thanks be to God.

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