

Treasured Outcasts

2 Samuel 1: 17-27 Mark 5: 21-43

I mentioned to the Session at our last meeting, as we were discussing the issue of whether or not to permit same sex marriages on the church property (the vote denied permission), some good but challenging entertainment. I recommended watching the Netflix-original (and exclusive) series “Frankie and Grace.” My wife got me watching it. The lead actresses are Lily Tomlin as Frankie and Jane Fonda as Grace, and the lead actors are Sam Waterston as Frankie’s husband and Martin Sheen as Grace’s husband.

The men have been partners in a law firm for years. But for the last ten years, the men have been lovers, continuing their marriages while carrying on their relationship in secret. But the time has come when the men have decided that they need to end their marriages and begin their new life together in the open. The first show has the men disclosing their plans to their wives in a restaurant, and the rest of the series has shown the results.

The acting, as you might imagine, is top flight – all have earned multiple nominations and awards in their careers. Sheen and Waterston are excellent portraying gay men while Tomlin and Fonda are superb as vastly different women, Fonda the corporate over-achiever, and Tomlin the hippie who burns incense, chants, smokes pot and teaches painting.

The show reveals the awkwardness, discomfort, pain, and sadness at the losses are forced to endure as their well-planned later years in life become an occasion of huge dislocation for the two couples and for their families and for their friends. They had been happily going along as the successful couples, social insiders, and fully believing that the last phase of their active lives would be more of the same.

Suddenly, the ultimate insiders with the set life have had their lives turned inside out and upside down. The insiders had become outcasts, ripped from their placid and predictable lives into emotional and relational chaos. The scenes are as laugh-out-loud hilarious as they are cringing painful.

The show also reveals the complexity of creating a new life that includes opening to a lifestyle that many refuse to accept or validate. It isn’t simply the men who are affected, but the relational network. We get to see how everyone becomes a fish out of water in a hurry, and how they try to cope with it all.

They all have to try to cope with it in some measure or else give up what had been created for over 2 dozen years of life together. There was treasure in all of that life experience which couldn’t be tossed aside easily, but they strain mightily to find their footing in these very different circumstances, and no map for anyone to know the way to go or what to do.

Cherished relationships like these that seek to withstand drastic shocks and difficult changes are a witness to the promise of new life. They believe that their life together matters, and it matters enough to endure a great deal to make peace, to get reconciled, and to do seemingly crazy stuff to make it all work. It's a witness to the promise of new life because this is what God does with us all the time. This is what God's grace looks like; it's often irrational, sometimes humorous, always strained, and quite revealing in its vulnerability. It is the blessing of beholding the outcast and seeing the treasure of the outcast at the same time.

In the lesson in Second Samuel, we hear David uttering a powerful, moving lament for Saul and his son Jonathon. This comes as some **surprise**, knowing the life-and-death struggle that had pitted King Saul, long disfavored by God, and David's best friend, Saul's son Jonathon against David. It was David, not Jonathon, who was the young man chosen by God to be the king over God's people. We might expect David to rejoice and be exultant in the end of his struggle.

Remember that David had been driven so far and for so long in his falling out with Saul that David had joined up with the Philistines. That's right, David actually joined the despised enemy forces, the Philistines. Indeed, Saul had his army and fought the Philistines, and David had his army and fought the Philistines, and when the two armies weren't fighting the Philistines, they were fighting each other. It was all going nowhere.

The Philistines turned David and his army away from the battle where Saul and Jonathon were killed.

When David hears word that the struggle is finally over, that Saul and Jonathon were killed, his sense of loss overshadows his sense of victory. David knew that Saul had done his best for his people most of the time, while knowing that at other times Saul was paranoid and obsessed, not entirely in control of good senses. He knew Saul and Jonathon as fierce and formidable warriors deserving praise and admiration. He would not tolerate anyone dancing on their graves; it was a time for national mourning.

Certainly it was also a time for healing for those in the respective armies, for the tribes of Israel and Judah. David's words, "How the mighty have fallen," reflects his awareness that these deaths in battle of the first king and the crown prince, his son, was a time for mourning in respect, and reconciling with the faults of the past in order to form the outlines of the kingdom for the future, starting with a fitting tribute to honor two heroes of the new kingdom.

While David's reaction had merit as a strategic response, it must also be recognized as a gracious one as well. As bitter and difficult as the contest between them had been, David treasured his relationship with Saul and Jonathon, and in parting, graciously honored and esteemed them for their contributions to the nation-state, and for their shared lives together. Rather than dancing on their graves, David not only salutes them, but expresses his genuine mourning for the events that had propelled them all on this course and ended with their deaths.

We seek again a reflection of the grace of God. It is love story that runs consistently through scripture. The ones who have been outcast, who have been marginalized, who have been enslaved, who have been oppressed, who have done wrong things, or simply been in the wrong place and time, these are the ones who God finds and lifts up.

We may best connect to the parable of the prodigal son as a story of an outcast who is treasured by the father despite his wanton uselessness. I was thinking of using the story of Hagar and Ishmael being cast out into the desert where Hagar despairs, but God intervenes to save the outcasts. Even the people of God enslaved in Egypt or exiled in Babylon are outcasts whom God refuses to surrender, for whom God will act and save in restoring the promise of life.

When we find Jesus doing his acts of healing, typically it is an outcast who is given attention, who is brought to new standing, and given the promise of new life. The outcast is restored as a treasure cherished and beloved by God.

The story from Mark has Jesus confronting two different illnesses virtually at the same time in another “sandwich” story plot. First, Jesus is met by Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue whose 12 year old daughter is ill and dying. Jairus is likely wealthy and respected. Still, Jairus **throws** himself at Jesus’ feet pleading with him to come to his house, lay his hands on her, and save her life. Jairus is more likely to have sent a servant to do his bidding, but here he abandons any pretense of status and snivels at Jesus’ feet in his desperation.

Jairus contrasts to the poor, outcast woman. As Jesus starts for Jairus’ house, this woman struggles through the crowd to touch Jesus’ garment. She’s been hemorrhaging blood for 12 years (quite a long time, 12 years), has spent all her money on quack healers, and is still without healing or hope. Jesus senses her touch, knowing something has happened. In the dimwit department, we have the disciples who, when Jesus asks who touched his garment, were incredulous, saying, “Are you kidding? With all of these people crowding around?” The woman perhaps senses she would be better off stepping forward and does so. Impressed by her **faithfulness**, Jesus pronounces her healed by that faithfulness. Remember, faithfulness brings healing.

Meanwhile, messengers from Jairus’s house arrive to announce that the child is dead. Don’t bother Jesus any further. These dour dudes stand in marked contrast to Jairus and the nameless woman who have shown their genuine faith in Jesus’ ability to make things new for them. Jesus doesn’t give the messengers of death any notice, telling Jairus, “Fear not. Just believe.” The bad news mamas are waiting when they arrive at Jairus’s house. The mourning squad is in full swing, crying and wailing, probably putting some extra crescendos into the drill since Jairus has deep pockets and could be expected to reward their overwrought professional grief handsomely.

When Jesus asks what they're doing, and then says the child is only asleep, they can't help breaking their grieving with peals of laughter. They portray quite a contrast; grieving over death one moment and laughing at the thought of life in the next.

Jesus throws them all out, commands the girl to rise, and she walks about.

Let's also notice that the girl is how old? Twelve years old. How long was the woman who touched Jesus' garment suffering bleeding? Twelve years. That can't be a coincidence, and women in menstrual cycle are considered unclean and outcast. Twelve years old may be a bit early, but it's around the right age for the onset of menstruation, of becoming a woman in society. It could be that one needed to stop bleeding while the other needed to begin.

Both needed the respective healing to occur in order to made whole to live into their life's promise. Neither one was regarded as a full member of the society due to legalistic readings of the law and long held understandings of what is traditional, acceptable, and righteous, blind to the vision of the Kingdom of God. Jesus' healing shows that God recognizes their outcast status and he does what God does all the time with outcasts; he embraces them and seeks their restoration, their salvation, and graces them with the new life promise.

When we recognize the outcasts for what they truly are, we begin to see with eyes of the Kingdom, with the vision of the Lord who cherishes them and seeks their healing and new life.

We would also join with David in his deep mourning, knowing that the future depends on completing recognition of the past, as was done so powerfully in Charleston this week. 'How the mighty have fallen.'

And we join with the poor woman who had one last hope to turn a new life out of the misery of being shunned. Nothing was left for her except to have faith in Jesus, reaching out to him and gaining what she had long sought.

And we join with someone like us, Jairus, casting aside our security, our resources, and even acceptability itself in order to focus on the Lord alone. Then we too would submit in faith and humility to the One who gives true healing and true life to every outcast, knowing that those deemed outcasts have been denoted by society and its religious institutions, not by the Creator, not by the Lord, and not by his Kingdom.