

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
November 15, 2009
Mark 5:21-42
“Words of Life”

The famous novelist Ernest Hemingway was well-known for his sparse, minimalist prose. One day he was challenged to tell a complete story in only six words. He paused for a while and then said: “For Sale: Baby Shoes. Never Worn.” A tidy story told in a few words. Hemingway succinctly evoked images of a family, a hoped-for child, and a poignant conclusion. Words are powerful things. Just a few words can tell an entire story – or, as we’ll see in this gospel lesson, can actually bring forth life.

Jesus was walking near the seashore with a huge crowd following him, when suddenly someone forced him to stop. And not just anyone, but Jairus – the respected leader of the local synagogue. He was a person of influence, whose wealth and righteousness had earned him a position of honor. Jairus fell at Jesus’ feet, both as a sign of respect and of humility, begging him to heal his daughter. For the sake of his little girl, Jairus was willing to do desperate things. It’s as if Jesus received a 911 call. So he altered his course and took off for Jairus’ house with the crowd still jogging along beside him.

Suddenly in the midst of all this frenetic activity, Jesus put on the brakes and stopped the entire procession. Everyone wondered what the reason was, and were amazed when Jesus told them why. “Who touched my clothes?” he asked. The disciples were incredulous: “Look at the crowd pressing in from all sides; how can you say, “Who touched me?” All the while the sand in the hourglass for Jairus’ ailing daughter was falling down, down, down. On one side was a named figure, wealthy with a proud reputation, who had publicly knelt before Jesus asking for his daughter to be healed. On the other side Jesus called forward an unnamed woman, impoverished, ritually and socially unclean, who had secretly sought healing for herself by touching the edge of Jesus’ cloak. Jairus is waiting; Jairus’ daughter is dying. But Jesus stops to bring into the light a woman hidden in the shadows, a woman he links with Jairus’ child by calling her “daughter” and to whom he said, “Your faith has made you well.” She’d been healed by her touch of his robe. But she only became truly whole – truly alive – once she was seen by Jesus and talked with Jesus and through that relationship her earlier faith came fully alive in all its power and glory and wonder. Oh, there’s a sermon in there somewhere...

Jairus for a moment was forgotten. Sadly the sand in the life-hourglass of his daughter ran out. Bad news came to the anxious father: “It is over. Your daughter is dead. Don’t bother the teacher anymore.” Notice they didn’t talk to Jesus, this carpenter, miracle-worker. They talked directly to Jairus – he was the big wig; he was the powerful one, so they thought. But Jesus interrupted them, told them to have faith, and continued the procession to Jairus’ house, moving from one daughter to another daughter.

In those days, if someone died, you routinely buried them as soon as possible – ideally before the sun set. Since the family was likely in total shock, you hired professional mourners - others who could wail and weep and mourn the death of the loved one. Those mourners had seen plenty of death in their days. They knew when someone passed from life to death. But in came this Jesus with a six word story of his own: “The child’s not dead but sleeping.” What a crazy bit of fiction-writing! They laughed Jesus to scorn. So much so that he had to send them away in order to bring a few disciples and the grieving parents to the bedside of the pale, 12-year old, little girl.

What did Jesus do next? This man, who’d surprisingly stopped the 911 procession for the sake of an unwelcome woman existing in a state of living death on the margins of life, now took the hand of a deceased child about to be removed entirely from the sphere of life and dared speak to her as if she was alive! He spoke words of life to a dead girl, talking to her as if her lifeless ears could still hear and her motionless limbs could still move around. “Little girl, get up!” And that’s precisely what she did. His words brought forth life as such words almost always have the capacity to do.

You’d be surprised how simple this formula actually is. By speaking life to death you can bring forth life. A few quick examples. Twenty years ago this week the Berlin Wall fell. Or more precisely it opened as the guards no longer prevented people from passing from East to West Berlin. Over a momentous five day period, 50,000 East Germans had fled to West Germany via Czechoslovakia, and the East Berlin Communist Party Politburo had all resigned. On the evening of November 9, a spokesman for the Communist Party announced at a televised news conference that a simple visa procedure would begin to allow East Germans to go visit the West. Poorly briefed about the actual workings of this program, he was asked when this would begin. His one word answer was “immediately.” And, as if that word was the key to unlocking the entire Brandenburg Gate, within hours hundreds rushed through the wall and thousands danced on top of it and over 40 years of death-like oppression came to an end.

A different example about the death-sustaining power of silence comes from the streets of Cleveland, where they are dealing with a man convicted of abusing and murdering 11 women – women who had struggled for survival on those same streets of Cleveland; women who sadly could disappear easily behind a murderer’s door because for so many people they were invisible to begin with. One commentator writing in the daily paper there noted that churches are “beautifully reactive” after these tragedies, holding their prayer services after the fact. The police are beautifully reactive, as are the politicians and the media. But the writer complained that too many women are ignored and isolated and expendable, living on the streets because of addictions and mental illnesses. Frankly, until we learn to speak words of life to them while they walk the streets, our post-mortem prayer services will always ring hollow.

More often than not, a word of life to someone living in lonely isolation can literally bring them from death to life. Maybe it's spoken as a friend or family member; maybe it's spoken as a 12-step sponsor or counselor. Maybe it's something we say instead of the silent, averted gaze that accompanies a guilt-relieving handout to a street person. Maybe it's a word reaching out to an isolated teen who is thinking about suicide, because for this age group suicide is among the top five causes of death. Every woman killed in Cleveland had a story, a family, and a right to a better life. They were just like the woman in the gospel story, who was considered unclean and had been pushed to the shadows of a living death until Jesus called her forward (moving her ahead of Jairus & Co.) so as to make her an example for all. "Your faith has made you well; go in peace." She who was effectively dead for 12 years was brought back to life.

And at the threshold to Jairus' house, Jesus' six word gospel was spoken again, but only a few people understood the power and beauty in his words. "The child's not dead but sleeping." What's the story in those words? It's a story that tells about a spiritual reality stronger than the world of flesh and blood. It's a story about death being the briefest of naps in relation to God's vast eternity of time. It's about the difference between seeing with eyes of faith or having vision distorted by doubt and cynicism. It's about talking to a dead girl as if she was alive, being done by the very person who himself would move from death to life, although in both cases no one expected it to happen at all. Resurrection?! Get real – until that's exactly what happened and the little girl arose from her death bed and the tomb was found empty on the third day.

Words both communicate and shape reality. They tell stories; they describe what we see. But words of life – words that are infused with resurrection convictions, that are overflowing with eternity orientations, that see the daughter and son-likeness in the children of the streets and shadows – those words shape and change and enliven the reality around us. Those are the words we are to speak. Those are the words we are to speak to those whom no one else is talking to. More specifically, those are the words we are to speak this week to someone, even just one person, so we can literally watch God's grace move them from death to life.

Hemingway had nothing on Jesus, who in this passage seemed to constantly speak words of life in six word phrases. "Your faith has made you well." "Jairus, do not fear, only believe." "The child's not dead but sleeping." "Talitha, cum; little girl, get up!" And if six words seem too much for you, try four words: "I'd like to help." Or three words: "I love you." Or two words: "I'm sorry." Or "I'm here." Or "God knows." You'd be surprised what new endings to stories you'll be able to write.

AMEN