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2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Mark 5:21-43

CONNECTED IN NEED

Rene Magritte was a Belgian surrealist artist who became well known for painting witty and thought-provoking images that challenged observers' preconditioned perceptions of reality during the 20th century.¹ One of his pieces, from 1933, is a painting from the perspective of being inside of a house looking out a window on a pleasant scene, where we as observers can see grass and a dirt path, mountains in the distance and a blue sky with puffy clouds above. But the lower left quadrant of the window view is obscured by a painting on an easel. The painting within the painting appears as if it is a perfect representation of what could have been seen if the canvas on an easel wasn't there. The painting is of grass at the bottom, and a dirt road. There is a tree growing in the painting and mountains in the distance, with blue skies and puffy clouds toward the top of the painting. It looks like the path and the mountains and the sky all match up from the painting on the easel and what can be seen through the window around the painting. But we don't know for sure what is beyond that canvas – whether the artist presented an accurate representation or whether it was what the scene might have been years ago before the tree in the painting had grown to that size or whether there really wasn't an actual tree there at all. Magritte's artistic piece is entitled, "The Human Condition."² Part of our human condition is that our sight of what is outside our window is limited. It is limited by our vantage point along with our expectations and the scope of our hopes.

Many of you are aware that this past week, 29 of us were a part of APC's intergenerational mission trip to rehab houses in Maine. During the week, we stayed in a dormitory at the University of Maine in Farmington. As we walked around and beyond campus during our non-work hours, there were of course pedestrian crosswalks that we used. I was impressed with the crosswalk culture there, as anytime a pedestrian came anywhere close to the crosswalk, the car traffic would stop. But for when that culture didn't hold, there was a sign at one of the crosswalks that encouraged pedestrians to wait for the crosswalk indicator that it

was safe to step into the street. The sign read, “You are not immortal – press the button,” referring to the crosswalk button. That is another part of the human condition – all of us are mortals who have health needs and vulnerabilities.

We hear a story about that part of the human condition in our reading from Mark. In fact, we hear two stories that are combined, which the writer of the Gospel of Mark liked to do in order to compare and contrast two stories. It is like a sandwich, with the bread of one story that starts, with an interior of another story, and then a conclusion to the first story. Jesus is walking in the midst of a crowd when a prominent man named Jairus, who was a leader of the synagogue, approaches him and begins begging him to come lay his hands on his daughter, who is near death so that she might be healed. Jesus goes with Jairus on this urgent mission.

Yet while they were headed to Jairus’ house, there was an interruption, a beginning of the meat part of the sandwiched story. As Jesus and Jairus and the crowd are all moving in the direction of the girl who was near death, someone touches the hem of Jesus’ cloak. It was an unnamed woman who was in a desperate situation. For the last twelve years, she had suffered from constant vaginal bleeding. Although she had spent all of her savings seeking medical care, her condition was actually worse, not better. As a result of her hemorrhaging, the woman was considered ritually unclean. She was not supposed to have physical contact with anyone else and she was not allowed to be an active part of synagogue life in her town. She lived, or perhaps I should say she anemically existed at the margins of the town. But this woman had faith mixed with hope that if she were to just touch the hem of Jesus’ cloak, that his healing power might flow into her. When she does so, he feels power going out of him and he asks who had touched him. In the crowd, it was hard to figure out who had touched him, and the disciples point out the obvious, having missed the miraculous. However, the woman comes forward and tells Jesus of her plight. Upon hearing her story, he addresses her by the same title that Jairus had used for his family member, ‘Daughter.’ No longer is she nameless. Jesus becomes the same kind of advocate for her that Jairus had been for his family member and he becomes more than that. For he then tells her that her faith had made her well.

Just then, news comes that Jairus’ daughter had died. But Jesus tells the girl’s father to follow the example of faith that the woman had exhibited. He takes three

of his disciples to continue the journey to Jairus' house. When they arrive, the mourners are already in the midst of their expressions of grief. Jesus tells them the girl is just asleep and the mourners laugh at him with derision. He takes the parents and his three disciples in to where the girl was. He takes her by the hand and says to her in his native Aramaic language, "Little girl, get up!" And she does! And then the little detail about the girl being twelve years of age is included.

It is at that point in the story that we begin to see what might have been obscured from our vision - how the two who had received healing were connected. One was twelve years old and the other had a malady which had lasted those same twelve years. Both of them are called 'daughters.' One illness is acute and the other is a chronic condition. One has an advocate at the beginning of the story and the other does not. One is destitute and the other comes from a family with means. With their similarities and differences, both seem to be in a helpless situation until the One who reveals God's desire for healing and wholeness comes. Both health situations had left them with an untouchable status according to Jewish religious practice, but Jesus is not deterred by that status and he heals them physically, as well as socially.

There are times when we don't see how our stories connect with the stories of others, particularly those who are in obvious need. There are those who paint a picture of others in need and make them out to be much different from you and me. But if we peek around what they paint and learn a bit about these others who are from beyond our borders or from down the street, we will begin to see that we are connected by our human needs. We all need to breathe, eat, drink, and have rest in a safe place. Does that mean that we must let anyone who comes to the U.S. borders into our country to stay? Does that mean our congregation can meet all the needs in the Philadelphia area? No, but we must at least treat others as human beings with God-given dignity. This week we celebrate a declaration written in Philadelphia that led to the establishment of our country. This week we might hear the song, "God Bless America." A scriptural understanding of blessing includes that blessings are meant to be shared, not hoarded. In times of need, God wants to paint a different kind of picture, that might even include you and me - one that leads to healing and wholeness, perhaps in simple or miraculous ways. Let's stay focused on the kind of picture that God is painting, with all of its hope and

possibilities, and we'll find something else that connects us with others around us – God's deep and ongoing love. By God's grace, that is part of the human condition as well. Amen.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ren%C3%A9_Magritte

² <https://www.renemagritte.org/the-human-condition.jsp>