# October 18, 2020, Christie Gardens Retirement Home, TorontoSermon by The Very Rev. the Hon. Lois M. Wilson, CC, 7peewee9@gmail.com

Also available on [video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWUEfW3rTPA): https://youtu.be/uWUEfW3rTPA

Texts: Isaiah 61:1‒4; Psalm 44; Mark 5:21‒43

## Good News to the Poor

I greet you in the name of Jesus Christ, whose body we are, and bring you greetings from some other members of the body: the small Protestant church in North Korea, the Church of Christ in China, and the Church of the Cherubim and Seraphim in Africa. We keep them in our prayers and expect them to do the same for us.

One of the best moments in the vice-presidential debate in the USA was when Kamala Harris held up her hand and said to Mr. Pence, who had been interrupting her, “Mr. Pence, I am speaking! Mr. Pence, I am speaking!” She immediately captured my vote.

Her interruption made possible a new relationship between them so that a conversation was possible between them. Every interruption opens up the possibility of a new relationship. COVID-19 is a major interruption in our lives, but it does open up new possibilities instead of the world returning to normal as some wish.

Three gospels tell the story of a major interruption and of new possibilities. This story is NOT history or biography. No one was there taking notes. This is the gospel genre of literature, which are reflections of the early Christians on the person of Jesus. It is more powerful than history or biography because the convictions of the Christian community inform the storytelling.

The story is about Jesus’ encounter with two women of very different backgrounds. One is Jairus’ daughter. She is 12 years old, belonging to a family of great privilege, and Jairus, her father, is a big man in the synagogue. The second story is of a woman ostracized because of a flow of blood, which she has had for 12 years.

The number 12 establishes a symbiotic relationship between the two and stands for wholeness, totality, completeness (12 tribes of Israel, 12 gates to Jerusalem, etc.).

So this is a story with a major interruption, and therefore the possibility of a new reality.

Story #1: Jesus is at the seashore, mixing with the “ochlos,” the street people, illegal immigrants, etc. Among them is Jairus, socially important and wealthy, at the centre of Jewish privilege. He is seeking Jesus because his 12-year-old daughter is in desperate need. Mark says she is dying. Luke, written later, says she is dead. Jairus implores Jesus for help, and so the two set out to go to Jairus’ house.

Suddenly the story is interrupted with ANOTHER story. Why did Mark do this?

The second is the story of a woman who has been menstruating for 12 years. The story immediately establishes a symbiotic relationship with Story #1 of Jairus’ daughter. The story means three strokes against the woman.

First, she is ritually unclean, so it is taboo for her to leave her home during menstruation according to the laws of Leviticus. So she is ISOLATED from her community. Lawrence Hill, in his Massey Lecture on Blood: The Stuff of Life, writes, “All five major religions, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism in their conservative manifestations, place restrictions on menstruating women. I have seen this in India where the Mar Thoma church practices this exclusion. This prejudice exists deeply in our culture as well. We refer to menstruation as ‘the curse.’”

Second, she is barren in a culture that prizes fertility. It is relatively recently in our own culture that single women are not called old maids, in derision.

Third, she is poor. She has spent all her money on doctors. She is unable to go to movies, or the art gallery, or out for dinner. She is excluded!

So barren, poor, excluded from community. And we all know how inclusion is SO important to mental health. We have learned that during COVID.

She is desperate. So she joins the crowd surrounding Jesus. If she could only creep up from behind and touch his garment, she believes it will connect her historically with the Hebrew tradition of wearing the tallit, the tasselled garment Jews wear that connects them with their history of liberation under Moses (Numbers 15:34). This audacious woman knows that if she can touch him, she will be liberated from her troubles. So she reaches out and immediately “she knew herself freed from her troubles.”

“Who touched me?” Jesus knows immediately some energy has left him. So she told him the truth. And this is the crucial line in the story.

The Revised Standard Version has ”Daughter, your faith has made you whole. Go in peace, freed forever from this disease.” The King James Version has “healed of that plague.” J.B. Phillips and the New English Bible have “freed forever from your trouble.” The Jerusalem Bible has “your faith has restored you to health, freed forever from your complaint.”

Asian theologians translate it, “Go in wholeness, freed forever from your bondage”―i.e., your taboo and exclusion. She broke the taboo, reached out, and appropriated the spiritual energy of Jesus.

Much hangs on the translation of this text.

The J.B. Phillips translation has “your willingness to risk [faith] has made you whole [has healed you.] I once asked Ted Scott, the Primate of the Anglican Church, the difference between faith and belief. He replied, “Think of a person at Niagara Falls turning to you and saying, ‘Do you believe I can walk across the falls on that high wire and not fall in?’ ‘Yes,’ you respond, ‘I believe you can do that.’ That’s belief. But if he should turn to you and say, ‘Hop on my shoulders and I will take you across,’ that is faith!”

All agree that it is the initiative of the woman that releases the spiritual power of Jesus. But he responded to the excluded women immediately, while Jairus had to wait.

“Go in peace.” Every time I phone my neighbourhood Jewish centre I am greeted with “shalom.” Peace means wholeness. The woman is restored to community, to full participation in the sociopolitical life of her society.

So what is happening in this interrupted story? Healing in its broadest sense―body, mind, and spirit, and restoration to full community. Jesus certainly manifested spiritual power, but he was not a magician whose powers contradict our reason. He establishes a new relationship with this woman. He heals the whole person.

Our understanding of the church as the body of Christ means that some churches include the practice of healing in their weekly rituals.

1) Methodist Church in New Delhi, 1975. This was my first experience of a healing ritual being included in the service of a mainline denomination. In the calendar it had this explanation: “The church’s main focus is dealing with the minds and spirits of people. It aims to free us from guilt, anxiety, and fear. Healing in these areas affects quite naturally the healing of the body. Prayers for healing of physical infirmities should always be in the context of the wholeness of body, mind, and spirit.”

2) Metropolitan Community Church, Toronto. At this church, founded by gay and lesbian people, there is always an invitation to all who feel the need of healing to step forward to be greeted by an elder, who speaks words of healing and anoints one with oil as a seal and sign of restoration into community.

3) Sandy Lake, Ontario. A photo hangs in my living room of a healing ceremony in this Indigenous community, showing the elders laying hands on a sick person. They know there is healing and energy in touch.

4) Ordination. When we practise the laying-on of hands we bear witness to our belief that spiritual strength is conveyed through physical means.

So, the woman is restored to community after 12 years. Suddenly the story is interrupted with Story #1 about Jairus’ daughter. Jesus and Jairus immediately set out (after the needs of the most vulnerable have been met), and Jesus tells him not to be afraid as she is only asleep. He clears the crowd from her room and, reaching out, says to the 12-year-old girl, “Get up!” She does, and is restored to wholeness and to community. Rather than suggesting they all fall on their knees and pray, Jesus says, “Give her something to eat!”

So why does Mark interrupt his first story? I think it may be because he can’t bear to see the one at the centre be made well until those at the edge are reconnected to full community. My friend Jim was travelling to San Francisco to celebrate the founding of the UN. Standing in the subway next to a beggar, he decided, “Since I didn’t want to miss Jesus,” that he would give some money to the beggar. He did so. Then, to his consternation, he found he hadn’t kept enough back for his fare. But the beggar noticed also, and returned enough money so Jim had his fare again!

If this captures some of the meaning of this passage, then what understanding does it give us of these COVID days? I watched Steve Paikin’s *The Agenda* show on TVO the other night, and they were discussing the issue of poverty. They kept endlessly quoting, “The poor we will always have with us,” though nobody knew where the quote came from. I was so mad I e-mailed Steve and pointed out they were misquoting Deuteronomy 15:4‒5, which says, “There will never be any poor among you IF only you obey the Lord your God by fully keeping my commandments.” I received a lovely acknowledgement back from the TV host, who said he will never misquote that again!

Today there ARE many more poor among us because of COVID. Many cannot afford a smartphone or computer or food.

Can we affirm that the setting free from economic insecurity for the poor, the isolated, the Indigenous person, the street person, the student...those on the edge must happen BEFORE we can be set free to live a life of wholeness?

COVID is a major interruption. Might it mean a fundamental change in relationships between those of us at the centre and those on the edge? What might be our response to this major interruption? Not, surely, a return to normal.

Recently the United Church joined the Anglican and Lutheran churches nationally and some major secular groups, such as 50 senators, to ask the federal government to make a structural change in Canadian society. Would it will all the temporary financial benefits (CERB, etc.) into a permanent Guaranteed Livable Income (GLI) for people earning less than $2,000 per month? Based on tax rolls, a cheque would automatically arrive in one’s bank account. No applications, no stigma. Pilot projects in Hamilton and Thunder Bay revealed that people on this benefit paid fewer visits to the doctor, got themselves better jobs, and joined in community events more. The Ford government in Ontario prematurely cancelled these pilot projects even though they showed less work for bureaucrats and much less red tape.

May we not return to normal… If our understanding of scripture is that the well-being of those at the centre depends on those at the edge, then can we forge new relationships, particularly economic ones? Today we are needing a radical reordering of our social and economic institutions as radical as medicare once was. COVID gives us that opportunity. Your church is urging the federal government to act now! Can we become companions with the poor? So that the peace and wholeness that God wishes is restored to your neighbourhood and to our world? There are blessings in interruptions. Maybe even good news to the poor!