



First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, United Church of Christ

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**June 28, 2015**  
Second Sunday after Pentecost

***10 Days in June***  
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Daniel Smith

*Text: Mark 5:21-43*

What a week! David Remnick captures it succinctly in his New Yorker piece, “*10 Days in June*.” He writes: “What a series of days in American life, full of savage mayhem, uncommon forgiveness, resistance to forgiveness, furious debate, mourning, and, finally, justice and grace.”

Justice and grace, yes! Justice, at last, powerfully symbolized by rainbow lights adorning national landmarks: the White House, the Empire State Building, and Cinderella’s Castle. Same sex marriage, a Constitutional right! Amen!

And grace, yes! If you have not already done so, I implore you, please, please watch all 37 plus minutes of President Obama’s eulogy at Rev. Clementa Pinckney’s funeral service on Friday. Our first African American president, speaking earnestly and urgently about the power of God’s grace after a horrific racist massacre in God’s house. Preacher, pastor and history teacher-in-chief! This is what he became for me on Friday, and I know for countless people across our broken and broken-hearted nation. For his eloquence and poise, for his pastoral and prophetic leadership, my heart, and I know many of our hearts, says: thank you!

I’m sure you’ve heard...he sang it too! Solo! He sang Amazing Grace! His gravelly voice not only carried the tune beautifully. It also carried a much-needed call to express that grace, in our words and our actions, by removing Confederate flags from public life, by making the “moral choice to change” our gun laws and culture, by resisting that “comfortable silence” that is already threatening its return when the news cycle moves on.

It has been a historic and indeed a holy week, from the Good Friday of the church massacre and a vision of Christ like forgiveness, to the quaking joy that came with the morning headlines rising out of the Supreme Court! It’s been that same intense confluence, that same kind of moral and spiritual whiplash, from the depths of human sin and sorrow to the heights of divine justice and joy, all in just a few days time! As Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it so well in our opening hymn, our hearts are “filled to brimming, with bitter suffering hard to understand.” Still, it feels like God’s “gracious powers” have been unleashed this week in profound and yet profoundly confusing ways!

I wonder if the crowds that were witnesses to the miraculous actions in today’s gospel passage could relate. A young woman audaciously asserts herself by reaching out to touch Jesus’ cloak. She does so in the hopes of healing a hemorrhage she’s had for 12 years. The

cause of the bleeding is not clear but we do know that any such ailment would have deemed her ritually unclean and untouchable. The woman needed to take care in how she went about her every interaction. She somewhat surreptitiously reaches for Jesus and lands a hand on his side. Taken back, he senses that God's healing power has unexpectedly flowed from him to her! Her audacity and her faith has made her well! From there, Jesus moves on to a household stricken by grief. A 12 year old girl has died. Jesus commands her to rise up and she does! All are amazed and he tells them to give her something to eat!

Did you happen to notice the numerical parallel in these two stories? In the first story, it's 12 years of hemorrhaging. In the second, it's a 12 year-old girl. Scholars observe here that 12 is a biblically important number often used as reminder of the 12 tribes of Israel. Powerful as these stories are in their own right, they can also be seen as metaphors for a social or even national dis-ease. They stand as symbols for an unhealthy society, one that may be dying to maintain its ways within the death-dealing context of the Roman Empire. Seen in this light, these stories are reminders of our collective need for and reliance on the powers of God's healing presence and death-defying hope.

On a related note, did you by chance notice that the President used some version of the word 'infect' three times in his speech? I'm guessing that the only reason I noticed was because I had this passage in mind. It wasn't because of any intentional rhetorical repetition, I don't think. But it was for me a theme that resonated deeply.

He used it first when talking about our criminal justice system, and the need to "make sure that that system's not **infected** with bias."

Later, he said: Maybe we can now recognize "the way a racial bias can **infect** us even when we don't realize it. He talked about our guarding against, not just racial slurs, but also the subtle impulse to call Johnny back for a job interview but not Jamal." He got a huge round of applause for naming that!

And again, toward the end, he said that once the TV cameras are gone and once eulogies are over, we too often 'slip into that comfortable silence' and go back to business as usual to "avoid uncomfortable truths about the prejudice that still **infects** our society."

Maybe I'm making too much of this but, taken together, this leads me to wonder if our country is suffering from some kind of collective infection. Even if that's not what he was saying, that's what I'm saying. Our country is sick! The word infect comes from the Latin *infectere* which means to spoil or to stain. Whether we are aware of it or not, the scourge of slavery has left an indelible stain on each of our souls. And, not for 12 years but for almost 400 years! Recent events are exposing a deep wound that has been left untended and untreated for too long. Our denial has made it almost gangrene and it affects and infects us all. More broadly than slavery, it's a history of ongoing racism, violence, and economic oppression; its an invisible stain of our unchecked prejudice and unchecked privilege. As a nation, we are hemorrhaging as a result. What we need now is the audacity to bring it out of shadows, to name it, to own it for what it is. We need to feel that the Spirit of God is driving and forcing us into the wilderness to face this. We need to reach out a hand that says we are sick and we can't cure ourselves without God's grace. As with the woman in the story, we don't just do this for our own sakes, but for the healing of others as well, maybe even for the overturning of those ritual laws that are anathema to God's mercy and justice!

What these 10 days of June have exposed is that our ongoing traumas of racial and sexual and gender based violence are not isolated events that impact isolated communities,

that require isolated, single-issue fights. What the audacity of Emanuel AME, and Obama, and the 5 righteous justices of the Supreme Court have told us is that now is the time for us to set aside all our isolating games of shame and blame! At some level, America, this “big raucous place”, as Obama called it, is one body. Its our body. Its our only body and it is infected at a cellular level. We are losing too much blood and too many tears. Still, so long as the privileged parts of the body still feel healthy, what's the rush?, says the devil on our shoulder.

Even after the events of this past week that have left our heads spinning, even as people feel inspired to “do something,” whether by supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, signing a petitions, moving on to fight for federal anti-discrimination laws for LGBT folks when it comes housing or employment, I worry that we will return to business as usual, unless we can find in ourselves the audacity to speak our truth and name that we are *all* sick. I worry that we will go back to that short-sighted mentality of isolated incidents, that impact isolated communities, that need isolated, single-issue fights.

When I was somewhat helplessly trying to connect the dots of current events on Friday, I reached out to the writings of a woman who I thought might shed light, Audre Lorde. She wrote a powerful book in 1991 called *Sister Outsider*. In one of her essays, called “There is No Hierarchy of Oppression” she begins by saying, “As a Black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, poet, mother of two including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself part of some group in which the majority defines me as deviant, difficult, inferior or just plain ‘wrong.’”

She goes on to write, “Within the lesbian community I am Black, and within the Black community I am a lesbian. Any attack against Black people is a lesbian and gay issue, because I and thousands of other Black women are part of the lesbian community. Any attack against lesbians and gays is a Black issue, because thousands of lesbians and gay men are Black. There is no hierarchy of oppression.”

No hierarchy of oppression. Timothy Stewart Winter picks up the thread in a NYT Opinion piece that ran today: “Gays must now devote to the fight for protection from discrimination the same resourcefulness and energy with which we fought for the right to marry. We should keep in mind that our struggle began as a fight against police harassment, and “Black Lives Matter” is our cause, too.” Amen!

What these 10 days in June may be bringing us, and oddly enough the 10 days before that – remember those lesser headlines about Caitlin Jenner and Rachel Dolezal — what these 10 days in June may be ushering in is a profound intersection of identity struggles. Whether Muslim, Catholic, Jewish, Black, White, Asian, Native American, Lesbian, Gay, Bi, or Transgender, we are recognizing that we are all sick and of the same illness. We may also be recognizing that it's people of privilege, like many of us here today, that have not been as attentive as we need to be to our moral health histories.

What these 10 days may be bringing us is something like a public health perspective on our moral and spiritual illness! A public health approach teaches us to examine not just the presenting symptoms and cures but the to zoom out and analyze the context, asking where does the illness come from, really, and what can be done to prevent it? Do you know about the Boston-based “Ask: “Where did the gun from?” campaign, for example? You see it on buses and billboards around Roxbury, Dorchester and Mattapan. It's an effort to shift media and law enforcement's focus from being solely on the victim and perpetrator, and instead to trace crime guns up the distribution chain, to go after the gun traffickers, the bad dealers, and even the gun

manufacturers. Are we beginning to similarly widen our focus, such that it's not just a few bad cops but an entire criminal justice system in need of a top to bottom transformation? As we realize how much money is being made on our prison-industrial complex, are we beginning to ask, "Where did that prison come from?" Realizing that it's not just the killer in Charleston but the Confederate flag flying culture- that and the wider infection of racial bias in our culture, are we starting to ask, "Where did the hate come from?" Perhaps this is God's grace beginning to shed a healing light, airing out the infections of our prejudice and privilege. I wonder, in the case of the institution of straight marriage, or the GI bill-financed housing boom that discriminated against Black people, or generations of legacy admissions to college, are we also starting to ask, "Where did the privilege come from?" "Where did the prejudice come from?"

Through documentaries like *Traces of the Trade*, or Henry Louis Gates' *Faces of America*, we are digging into our past and taking a moral and spiritual inventory! Through Ta-Nehisi Coates' article "Case for Reparations", we are maybe, just maybe beginning to take stock of the repentance and the reparations owed to generations of people oppressed by unfair and unjust housing, education, criminal justice, and healthcare systems. How much more proof or documentation do we need until we have the audacity as a nation to cry out and say that we are sick! Even and most especially the so called healthy parts, we are morally and spiritually sick, living and continuing to benefit from a system riddled with the sin-filled infection of mostly male, mostly straight, and mostly white pride, privilege and prejudice. Are we making progress? Yes, I believe we are. But it seems some part of our self may already be on that deathbed in Jairus's house, in need of all the grace and power we can get to claim us and to revive us! Beloved, is not the news of this last week a story of hemorrhaging and healing for our time? Is it not the way that God has broken into history, into every sleeping and already dead part of us, as if to say, "Talitha Cum, young daughter, I say to you, arise!"

Friends, we have got to believe that our healing is at hand! We have to believe that God's forgiveness waits, that God's love will stand by us as we tend to our collective wounds with unflinching honesty. Our moral and spiritual health depends on it. The moral and spiritual health of our nation depends on it, lest our ongoing denial turns us gangrene. The work that is before us falls most especially on those of us who have been the often unwitting and unaware beneficiaries from these systems. It starts with recognition, the honest to God recognition that my privilege makes me sick! Our privilege has made us sick! Together, we are in need of a long and drawn out disinfecting process, a moral and spiritual self-assessment that will require change at a cellular level. It will require repentance. It will require relinquishment of at least some of what we think we have worked so hard for. To do it right, it will require reparations. It happened before, Germans paying billions to Israel for absorbing Jews after the Holocaust, for example, or the US paying Japanese who were interned during World War II.

Most of all though, it will require our utter reliance on the mercy and grace and power of God! It will take the audacity to reach out and say we are sick and we can't cure it ourselves! Can we imagine the power that will flow out of God if we were to reach out, in earnest, together? It will also require the faith that God can raise our daughters, and sons, and us too, when we slip back into that too comfortable silence, when we've grown morally dead to the dreams of a better tomorrow for all God's children, when we've fallen asleep on the job of what it will take to get there! God's grace is breaking into our history even now, saying "Talitha cum, I say to you, arise!"