



YOUTH DAY (ADDRESSING YOUTH VIOLENCE)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – Luke 8:41-42, 49-56a (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 41) Just then there came a man named Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He fell at Jesus' feet and begged him to come to his house, (v. 42) for he had an only daughter, about twelve years old, who was dying. As he went, the crowds pressed in on him.

(v. 49) While he was still speaking, someone came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the teacher any longer." (v. 50) When Jesus heard this, he replied, "Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved." (v. 51) When he came to the house, he did not allow anyone to enter with him, except Peter, John, and James, and the child's father and mother. (v. 52) They were all weeping and wailing for her; but he said, "Do not weep; for she is not dead but sleeping." (v. 53) And they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. (v. 54) But he took her by the hand and called out, "Child, get up!" (v. 55) Her spirit returned, and she got up at once. Then he directed them to give her something to eat. (v. 56a) Her parents were astounded.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Youth Sunday serves as an opportunity for worshipping congregations to recognize the discipleship, stewardship, spiritual gifts, and overall value of youth within their respective communities. Youth Sunday is celebrated in a variety of ways depending on the culture of the church. However, on Youth Sunday, youth are traditionally encouraged to lead the congregation in every act of worship, including prayer, praise, devotion, and song. It is also customary for a youthful preacher to deliver a sermon that speaks to the challenges and concerns of contemporary youth in a relevant and meaningful way.

Given the disproportionate social challenges and ethical dilemmas that regularly confront African American youth and families, Youth Sunday is especially significant because it provides a safe space for black youth to be recognized for their positive contribution to society. Too often,

African American youth are exposed to negative images of themselves that limit self-understanding and, therefore, stunt the flourishing of their possibilities as productive selves-in-community. Youth Sunday encourages young people to recognize themselves as made in the image of God and empowers them to actively engage their potential as the future generation of spiritual leaders.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Luke 8:41-42, 49-56a

Part One: Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Black children are more than three times more likely to be poor than white children. Sixty-three percent of black youth grow up in single parent homes. The infant mortality rate for African American infants is more than double than that of white infants. Nearly 50% of black American children live in poverty.¹ These staggering statistics provide just a glimpse of the troubling social landscape into which too many black children are born and prematurely perish.

Walking through the streets of Harlem, or any urban center, one is regularly exposed to the awful reality of poverty and its consequences. Like Jairus' daughter, the socioeconomic climate of so many black communities suggests that African American youth "are dead." However, Luke 8: 49-56a contends that the realities that confront our families and communities can be transformed by the power of God, especially when adults step up.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The Lukan Gospel suggests that Jairus was a ruler of the synagogue. He was a leader in his religious community. His role was similar in function to a contemporary church trustee. Jairus was a prominent member of society and his daughter's life was in serious jeopardy. Historically speaking, this story is quite odd because of its focus on a girl-child. In the ancient world, men were valued much more than women. Because women were deemed especially worthless, infanticide was most commonly practiced at the birth of infant girls. Women and girls of the ancient world were most often recognized only as property and, therefore, less than human. Their social status marginalized them so that it did not matter to their communities whether they lived or died. Luke's focus on Jesus' response to a marginalized girl-child is therefore radical.

Hopelessness (nihilism) is a major theological theme in this text; it is repeated three times. Although the text does not tell us the circumstances of the young girl's situation, in vv. 41-42 we meet Jairus who is at the end of his rope and thrown into complete despair because of his daughter's situation. This ruler of the synagogue has fallen into the dirt at the feet of the rebel Jesus to beg for mercy and for help with the awful situation he is confronting. At the same time, in v. 49, we hear the voice of someone else who, "while Jesus is speaking," announces that all hope is gone, because the young girl had already succumbed to whatever had plagued her body and/or mind. This somebody remains nameless, although their words, "Your daughter is dead," continue to ring and sting throughout time. "Your daughter is dead," announces another police officer to a grief-stricken mother. "Your daughter is dead," announces a teacher to the parent of a child killed at school. "Your daughter is dead," announces the drug-dealer, systems and society—"She's dead!"

Then, in v. 52, the crowd of people who had gathered at Jairus' home (who most likely were the people from the synagogue and friends and extended family members from the greater community who knew Jairus and his daughter) displayed their utter hopelessness in terms of God's ability to bring new life to this seemingly "dead" situation by laughing at Jesus. This is the trifold flow of hopelessness that presents itself in this text. A father is at the end of his rope, a nameless man says, "She's dead," and the community laughs at the Savior.

While the hopelessness that pervades this community [of faith?] is made evident at every turn of the text, the theological theme of *faithfulness* is simultaneously revealed! In the first place, in vv. 41-42, Jairus, who had formerly insisted that his daughter was dying, is transformed before the reader's very eyes. He begins to believe that Jesus really can turn the situation around. Jairus disregards his own power and authority as a leader of the synagogue and seeks Jesus in order to plead for mercy. The text goes on to suggest in v. 49 that after he had sought and found Jesus, Jairus believed Jesus so much that they walked together to Jairus' house. In other words, the faith of Jairus, the parent of the girl-child, led him to bring Jesus home with him.

At the same time, we recognize through this text how God through Christ is faithful to the people of God in a number of ways. First, like Jairus, when we seek God, we will find God-- "*Seek and ye shall find.*"² Next, Jesus is able to overcome the obstacles that individuals and communities construct that would seemingly limit the efficacy of God's Word and work. Said differently, *what is impossible for humanity is possible for God.*³ Even though most available evidence would suggest that our youth are "dead" because of what confronts them in the world, *with God all things are possible* (Mark 10:27). Even though we keep hearing the ringing, stinging, echo—death, death, death -- we will not succumb to the noise no matter who makes the pronouncement. Finally, Jesus is faithful because even when we laugh at God (v. 52), God in Christ continues to act in the world. God is faithful to humanity even when we are faithless.

This text prompts contemporary communities to acknowledge that even though social realities make it appear that African American youth are dead, the elders of the community are still called to responsibility. As people of faith, the elders (parents, mentors, leaders) are responsible for seeking Jesus and pleading the case of the children of the community especially when the children are unable to plead for themselves. It is next their responsibility to believe Jesus enough to walk with him, even daring to bring him into their home or other gathering place in the community, even to the very bedside of their children. The adult members of the black community must recognize that status and money are not transformative all by themselves, if at all. Rather, it is God through Christ who has the power to **rescue** black youth by shifting death-dealing realities in life-giving and justice-affirming ways.

So, the greatest gift that we can give to all youth on this Youth Sunday are parents who will stand in the gap for them and communities who will not laugh or write our children off. Instead, infused by the Spirit and "sick and tired of being sick and tired" of seeing the death-grip that has been placed on our children, they will become the mouths, hands, and feet of Jesus and do some raising from the dead, too. Remember, Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me **will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do**, because I am

going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it” (St. John 14-12-14).

Celebration

This text teaches us that even though circumstances may suggest that we are dying (individually and/or communally), in the midst of death, despair, and “nameless/faceless” statistics that say it is just not possible, we serve a God who defies the odds and commands us to “Get up (v. 54)!”

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include, but are not limited to:

Sounds: Jairus pleading with Jesus (v. 41); the overwhelming noise of the crowd (vv. 41-42); the terror sounding proclamation, “Your daughter is dead” (v. 49); the mourning and wailing of the people (v. 52); unbelieving laughter (v. 53); and

Sights: Jairus pleading with Jesus (v. 41); the crushing crowd (v. 42); a lifeless child (v. 49); and the spirit returning to the child (v. 55).

III. Other Sermonic Comments or Suggestions

- A. The Blue Nile Rites of Passage Ministry -- online location: www.bluenilepassage.org. This is a ministry of The Abyssinian Baptist Church that is designed for the specific purpose of rescuing African American children from the many social factors that threaten their lives on a daily basis. The Blue Nile is the largest Rites of Passage program in the nation and has recently chartered chapters in Greenburgh, New York and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. For more information and to begin a Rites of Passage ministry at your church contact Abyssinian.
- B. Youth Sunday Suggestions
Youth Sunday requires that youth are able to express themselves and their love for God in ways that speak to their reality. Youth Sunday worship might include a youth choir, spoken word artists, drama/mime ministry, liturgical/praise dancers or steppers, Christian rap, and other creative approaches to the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ. *Thriving youth ministries ensure the future of the Church.*
- C. Read in your Sunday School classes, Bible Study, women’s or men’s groups, Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care by Emilie M. Townes. This text offers statistics that indicate that the health of the entire black community is threatened by social injustice.

Notes

1. Townes, Emilie M. Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006.

2. See Matthew 7:7 (New Revised Standard Version).
3. See Matthew 19:26 (New Revised Standard Version).