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The Gospel According to Daddy’s Girl: Incest in the Church

Mark 5:21-43 (NRSV)

When we think of a Daddy’s Girl we think of a young, idyllic child, with princess dreams and fairy godmother visions. She comes bounding down the stairs, jumps into her father’s arms, swings her arms around his neck, and gives him a big kiss on the cheek. They toss their heads back and laugh loudly, mirroring each other’s energy. This Daddy’s Girl has her father wrapped around her pinkie finger.

But for other Daddy’s girls, there are no princess dreams, only nightmares, no fairy godmother visions, only sputtering daydreams. The original poem you just heard is the cry of women and young girls who have been molested by their fathers. Our father is usually the first man that we come to know as provider and protector, like Jairus, who goes to Jesus on behalf of his daughter. But, there are some fathers who betray us, putting us on a years-long journey to recovery.

In today’s text, we encounter a dying girl and a bleeding woman. The girl, let’s call her Talitha, which means *little girl* in Aramaic, is 12 years old and

mourned by her father. The woman, let's call her Miss Sangre (which means *blood* in Spanish), is bleeding from her vagina for 12 years and shunned by all. They are, in essence, spiritual fraternal twins. "Bound by blood, marginalization, and impending death."

For as long as the little girl has been alive, her fraternal twin sister has been dying. I imagine that this bleeding woman, with voice and agency, was once a dying girl, silent and spoken for.

What this narrative tells me is that our stories are inextricably linked. We, as the daughters and sons of God, sisters and brothers in Christ, are a family unit of human beings. And as human beings we are also sexual beings. And most Christian churches have a strained, at best, and amputated, at worst, relationship with sex and sexuality. Now perhaps you all at North Decatur Pres have it all together when it comes to sex-talk, but I know for Black churches, in particular, sex and sexuality are seen as demonic. The hateful relationship we have with our bodies stems from the dreadful days of the transatlantic slave trade. What if you were stolen from your home only to be mandated to work for free for your captors? What if you were forced to stand on a platform, naked, while potential buyers groped your breasts,

vagina, or penis? What if your family could be split apart at a moment's notice, never to be seen from again?

Our historic, collective narrative with our bodies allows a spirit of deception to enter our conversations around sex. Sex is *not* sexual abuse. Sex is built on the beauty of our divinely created bodies. At the center of sexual abuse is power, control, and manipulation.

Abuse taints sexuality, which is a gift from God and indeed a part of a divine plan for procreation. Abuse devours, destructs, and destroys. How then does the horror of abuse continue to creep through our homes and churches?

I imagine, it's due to silence. When stories of incest are uncovered, it is easy to want to explain it away. People might say, "I don't see how he could do something like that," or wonder, "but he's such a good guy." Victims are told, by family and friends to "forgive and forget," some pastors say, "just get over it" and some church members urge, "don't make our family look bad." We ostracize those who come forward. We are like the doctors who instead of making Miss Sangre's condition better, made it worse! We are like the crowd: pressing into Jesus but stampeding those who are crawling toward him. Must women reach out from the crowd for healing? Ashamed

and covertly rather than openly and publically? It is time to open a space for healing.

For although Jesus resurrected privately, He healed publically.

It is time for Jesus' resurrection to mean something to the Talitha's in our lives. Like Pastor David mentioned in last week's sermon, the resurrection is a reminder of God's great power and Love.

In Jesus' resurrection, we encounter a God who resurrects Jesus, who brings Jesus from death into life and total restoration.

And God's love is the force that rolls away the stone in front of the tomb.

God's love changes hearts.

God's love forgives our faults.

God's love enables justice.

God's love allows us to grieve deeply our losses and to hope that our pain is not the final word.

God's love raises the dead. And God's love never ends.

And there are people in your life and in this world who need to know God's radical love for them. One in 4 girls and one in 6 boys will be sexually

assaulted by the time they are 18-years-old. That means we have women in our pulpits, men in classrooms, girls in our study groups, and boys in our pews dealing with guilt, shame and low self-esteem. And this can go on for decades.

Miss Sangre was bleeding for 12 years. There are some liberal, Calvinist, presbytery-loving saints who have been oppressed for 12 or more years by memories of their abuse. Maybe you haven't been suffering that long, but you're trying to study for a midterm and you suddenly break down crying because you think about that rape. You're trying to get some sleep before your big interview in the morning and all you can remember is your father molesting you. You're on the treadmill at the gym and his face creeps into your mind. You're driving in your car and her smell overwhelms your senses. You're doing your grocery shopping and their threats intoxicate your psyche.

You are no different from Miss Sangre who was tormented by a constant flow of blood and loss of life. She was abused, isolated, and alone. It would seem that we would want to open our arms to her for she is doubly afflicted. Enduring physical ailment while being socially rejected. This double trouble mirrors the dilemma of Black women in America; in a racist, patriarchal,

society we are plagued by the plight of blackness and the shortcoming of femaleness. Uncle Sam defiles her self-worth daily, telling her she's not beautiful or valuable or even a woman. Ntozake Shange in her chorepoem *for colored girls who've considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* wrote, bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma I haven't yet conquered.

And many Black women are dealing with the effects of incest. But so are White women. And Latinas and women of Asian descent. Incest transcends racial, socio-economic, and denominational lines. And sadly, many are suffering in silence. Who, like Jairus, will champion on their behalf?

I imagine that if Jesus were here today He would tell us the same thing He told Jairus, "Do not fear. Only believe." Our first reaction should not be fear, but belief. We live in a culture of unbelief that blames victims and protects perpetrators. I think of all of the girls and women: Olympic gold medalists, collegiate-aged women, Hollywood actresses, and, even, the girl next door—whose stories are stuffed under a cloud of more contemporary news. Where we protect perpetrators and blame victims. Meanwhile, this teenaged young woman, caught between Talitha's youth and Miss Sangre's womanhood, was bleeding and pleading, who will go for me? Who will speak for me?

Do not fear. Only believe.

This is what young girls and boys and grown women and men want to hear, “I believe you.” These abused children of God, your sisters and brother in Christ, much like Miss Sangre, are isolated, shamed, and brokenhearted.

This shouldn’t be. As you embark on this 5-year plan, don’t forget Talitha. Don’t forget Miss Sangre. Don’t do so much that you forget to see.

Remember your Child Protection Covenant: this is a place where our kids can be safe from abuse. When Jesus heals Talitha, she comes into her own; and when she is restored, she is fed. North Decatur Pres, Decatur, Atlanta, GA, the United States, the world should be one global community of healing, of restoration, and feeding.

We are many members, but one body. What affects one of us affects all of us.

To be sure, these are difficult questions to ask and this is difficult work to do. It will require love, sacrifice, honesty, and tough conversations. But the bleeding women and dying girls in our churches, schools, and homes deserve more.

They deserve guardians like Jesus, who disregarded social taboos by speaking to a woman in public. He ignored religious conventions by touching a dead body. And we are called to do likewise. It may not be “proper” to talk about sex and sexuality, but we have to reclaim our language. Apostle Paul told us that there is no male nor female in Christ. So the Aramaic freedom song, *Talitha cumi* Jesus sung to Talitha is the same one serenading you, today. After all, we have all been hurt, betrayed, misused, or taken advantage of. There is a bit of Talitha in all of us here. We all have cracks from life’s turmoil. But we have our tongues and the might of God’s resurrecting power.

So, today, let us resolve that if anything should be broken, it should be the silence surrounding incest. After all, it wasn’t Jesus’ touch, but Jesus’ word that healed Talitha. Our words are what can help or prevent healing.

Here at North Decatur Pres, this spiritual home away from home, we have gorgeous stained glass windows in a historic building in a perfect location. Even now, we rest in a gleaming sanctuary outfitted with the latest liturgical colors. And yet, there are members of our community whose seemingly picture-perfect worlds, are actually shattered at the core. And it’s only truthelling, love, and acceptance covered in worship, praise, and prayer that

will help us gather these shards of personality and pain to create a mosaic truly becoming of the Body of Christ.

There is hope for victims to become Survivors. Those who do not merely exist, but, rather, excel despite being abused.

If you've been sexually abused, I urge you to connect with our mental health counseling partners. What has happened to you is terrible and terrifying. And you are not alone in this and we are here to support you.

If you know someone who was molested or raped, assaulted or traumatized in some way, be prayerful and intentional and try to have them talk to someone you trust.

For those of you, especially you future pastors and preachers, who want to be an ally to Survivors of sexual abuse, practice active listening, be present for people. All it takes is time and trust for stories to be told. When someone discloses abuse to you say, "I acknowledge you. I believe you, and I am so sorry this happened to you." For worship, consider using gender inclusive language. Be mindful that "Father God" for some people is a brutal reminder of dreadful memories. Referring to God solely as Father can be a barrier

instead of a conduit to God. God is big enough to be mother, father, aunty, uncle, and cousin, too. Get up from worshipping at the feet of pronouns.

Rise up from secrets to liberty.

Talitha cumi. Rise, young girl!

Talitha cumi. Rise, grown woman!

I speak to the Talitha in you, the little child that was hurt, fondled, or misused. I say, "Rise" to your inner spirit. Molested by sexism. Rise! Raped by homophobia. Rise! Battered by racism. Rise! Bruised by injustice.

Awaken from your slumber!

Rise! Dr. Maya Angelou a Survivor of rape preaches the Gospel According to Daddy's Girl when she proclaims:

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may tread me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like sun and like moons,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.
You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,

You may kill me with your hatefulness,

But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?

Does it come as a surprise

That I dance like I've got diamonds

At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame

I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in pain

I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

Like Miss Sangre

I rise

Like Talitha

I rise

Won't you join me, North Decatur Pres,
and rise?