

“Living On”
Mark 5:21-43
Andrew Foster Connors
6th Sunday after Pentecost
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When you visit the University of Central America in San Salvador they take you first to a small museum commemorating the martyrs killed during the war. There is the blood stained robe that one martyr was wearing when the military dragged him out of bed and killed him. There are bone fragments of martyrs, solemnly lit in small glass-front cubes, laid out together in the shape of a cross. And there is evidence of their work – journals of time spent with the poor, essays and sermons they wrote, items that were important to them. There is also a timeline of deaths of priests year after year leading up to that November day in 1989 when the Salvadoran army, under orders from high levels of government, came to the university to assassinate more priests.

When you’ve finished touring the museum they take you to a classroom and invite you to look through their photo albums documenting that day. The black colored albums are evidence of physical damage from that day – bullet holes in walls, ransacked offices and rooms, damaged property. The red colored items are the graphic books. Photos of the bodies of the slain. Six Jesuit priests, plus a housekeeper and her daughter discovered by the death squad that carried out the operation.

Having grown up in the US, I’ve grown accustomed to the idea that such photographs shouldn’t be shown, “out of respect for the dead and their families,” we say. Yet peering into this album of death made it impossible to glorify sacrifice without having to look at the brutality of torn flesh, the horror of a mother’s body arranged in a desperate attempt to protect her daughter, disfigured faces and other horrors that I don’t have words to describe. Looking into that album made it impossible to ignore the consequences of the training these soldiers had received at the US School of the Americas and the weapons they had received from us.

Looking through those albums accompanied by some of our youth, I had a sudden realization that, like the mother of Emmett Till, our Salvadoran hosts wanted us to see. They wanted us to be witnesses to violence that claimed the lives of two bishops, countless priests, and tens and thousands of their fellow citizens. They wanted us to see.

Since five youth, another adult and I got back from El Salvador on Thursday I’ve been thinking a lot about why being a witness is so important. I don’t mean “witnessing” in the religious sense that it’s often used of telling other people about God or your beliefs. But witness in the sense of being an active, public observer. Someone present to people who have been through pain and choose to share their story about it.

In the story today, Jesus himself, is a witness. Theologian Shelly Rambo argues that in this story Jesus is not a self-conscious healer of the woman who has

been bleeding for twelve years.¹ He is rather a witness to her healing. “Who touched my clothes?” Jesus asks. He knew something had happened but didn’t quite know what it was. He knew that power had gone forth from him but he didn’t know who or why. This is not to say that Jesus wasn’t involved in this woman’s healing or that Jesus isn’t capable of being involved in the healing of others in more self-conscious ways. Indeed the two healings that bookend this story are exactly stories about the self-conscious power of Jesus to bring healing where he will.

But in this story, Jesus doesn’t know. The healing happens without his full cognition.

“Witnessing is a practice that is not dependent on full comprehension,” Rambo writes, “instead, the practice of witnessing entails entering into the complexities of not knowing fully. [In this passage] Jesus does *not* know. And in this absence of knowledge, in this gap *between* bodily touch and subsequent speech, the text presents a distinctive and necessary moment in the difficult process of *living on*.”²

Shelly Rambo acknowledges that understanding Jesus as witness seems to contradict what some of us have been taught about Jesus as all-knowing and all-powerful. Yet, she argues, “Jesus’ body is still the site out of which and through which healing power flows. Highlighting his witness does not take him out of the healing process. . . It positions him differently. . . [and] gives attention to a space, that [could be more important] than Jesus as rescuer. . . A witness stands in the absence of a full story, attesting to what cannot be known fully or brought into language.”³

And I find that incredibly hopeful at a time when the scourge of violence seems to be touching more and more of us. When there isn’t going to be relief anytime soon from the structural violence leveled by our government against immigrants. When the cradle to prison pipeline isn’t going to be addressed as we thought. When we know that it’s likely that the inequalities are going to grow bigger and the environment is going to continue to come under assault. When another shooting takes down people who are loved, loved this time by some of us personally, and yet we know with our current leadership there will be no action, only empty thoughts and prayers.

In other words, when it’s clear we cannot root our hope in the “things will surely change soon” mentality of previous eras and generations. When more and more of us are facing that process known well by survivors of the war in El Salvador, the survivors of the streets in Baltimore, the survivors of abuse in our families, the survivors of hate in our world.

We can be a witness. The one who offers connection through listening, embrace, support. That person who participates in the process of healing not through their understanding, not through heroic rescue, not through manipulation

¹ Shelly Rambo “Trauma and Faith: Reading the Narrative of the Hemorrhaging Woman,” *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 2009, 13, 2. I am indebted to McKenna Llewellyn for this resource and for her broader teaching of the connections between trauma and faith that are critical to a contemporary theology that offers healing instead of more harm.

² *Ibid*, 248.

³ *Ibid*, 251-252.

or control, but through their attention to those who are made victims by the brutality of our world. That's where people learn the process of living on, according to Shelly Rambo. We don't have to know how healing happens in order to participate in it. We don't have to understand why healing happens in order to participate in it. We just have to be willing to be a witness.

And while I don't want to romanticize any of the struggles that our Salvadoran siblings have faced; nor do I want to imply that we should not be rallying in the streets for basic human values of keeping immigrant families together, reducing the numbers of weapons on our streets, opposing the new Jim Crow, the truth is that the Salvadoran people have a lot more experience than most of us in the process of *living on*. Living on, when the violence doesn't end. Living on, when the oppression doesn't cease. Living on, when there's little to ground your hope in other than those people who are willing to listen to your story and receive your pain.

This past Tuesday we drove up to Cinquera, a place where the guerrilla movement was particularly strong during the war. That movement didn't start with academic notions of "communism" or ideas of revolution. It started when a Catholic priest came to town and started teaching poor farmers how to read. Unlike his predecessors, when someone died of malnutrition or a treatable disease he didn't tell them this was God's will. He asked instead, "why don't the poor have enough to eat?" Pretty soon those poor farmers were reading the Bible for themselves and meeting with other poor farmers to demand basic human rights. The oligarchy retaliated by putting a guard house in town with 30 soldiers. Soon those soldiers were robbing and beating people. Soon the robbing and beating turned to rape and murder. Farmers took up arms to defend their families. Our own government financed thugs who claimed to be ridding their country of communism.

Rosa told us how her older sister, aged 14 joined the guerrillas because she didn't think she had a choice. She would either face violence as a victim at the hands of the soldiers or as a resistor fighting back. She died two years later in the war. Rosa lost 5 of her 7 brothers and sisters. Somehow she found a way to live on. Forced into a refugee camp, they scrounged there for years on very little. Her town was destroyed entirely. Yet when the war ended, she came back to participate with others in rebuilding their village from scratch. Somehow she found a way to live on. Since that time she has fought to keep their church from being bulldozed, her land from being mined, and her water from being privatized. They've found a way to live on. She has fought alongside others like her. They are living on.

Our plane arrived at Dulles on Thursday right about the time the shooting began in at the newspaper in Annapolis. That night, over dinner, a friend filled me in on all the depressing news I had missed. He expressed a sense of hopelessness. Yet listening to all the depressing news I had this strange epiphany. I didn't feel hopelessness. I felt a resolve to focus, to fight, to stand up, to stay grounded in the values that our nation needs from us and in this community that reminds us all that we can trust and love and share with other people.

It's the hope I think Jesus felt when he realized that this woman's faith had made her well. He had witnessed it right before his eyes. Healing he hadn't

controlled. Life he had received unconsciously. Joy that happened and his only role was to witness it. "Your faith has made you well," he said.

Sometimes we think we go to a country like El Salvador to "help." A lot of churches try to do exactly that. They build a house, even though the Salvadorans would rather build their own houses. Or they paint a wall even though the Salvadorans would rather paint their own walls. And we do help with our financial resources supporting godchildren with an education, keeping an afterschool program going, supporting a senior center. We do have resources that we must share.

But it's never been clearer to me that we go to El Salvador to witness the faith of people who have been through the hell of war, who continue to survive injustice that most of us will never know, who live with a fraction of what even the poorest of us have, and yet have found a way to live and love and give and share and laugh and fight and struggle for a world they may not ever see. People who know something of the process of *living on*. That place where life is found. We go to witness it and return resolved to focus, to fight, to stand up, to stay grounded in the values that our congregation, our city, and our nation needs from us now more than ever. We go to see a faith that is making people well so that we can celebrate it, learn from it and live it for the sake of our neighbor and for our own joy and salvation.