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**Mark 5:21-43**; Psalm 30

## PARDON OUR DUST

Things are a mess around here right now. Deconstruction is happening all around our church. For starters, there is the work being done to repair the steeple. The entire front entrance is fenced off while workers remove damaged and weak portions of our steeple and ultimately work to repair those sections. This is supposed to go on for 6-8 weeks.

Next week work is started to begin here in the sanctuary to sand and repaint the chancel wall that had been damaged by water. Scaffolding will be erected here in chancel so workers could sand the damaged area and then repaint the entire wall. But before this can happen, the organ had to be protected from the dust. So, the outer pipes have been removed, the inner pipes have been wrapped in plastic, and the organ console itself has been wrapped up, in order to protect them from the dust.

In the meantime, deconstruction has begun on much of the 2nd floor. First, UPC members had to take apart the Holzwarth room and the small meeting rooms along the hallway, store the furniture, take down pictures, and empty cupboards and closets. Then our tenants, BSBH, began their construction phase to remodel that space to their needs: to tear down walls, rip out carpets, remove ceiling tiles, and so forth. This work is expected to continue for 8 weeks or so.

At some point in the near future, our own construction project on the Auditorium is expected to begin as we renovate that space to better meet our congregation's needs. So deconstruction of that area is presently underway as we empty closets and remove furniture down stairs. Eventually, major deconstruction will take place as the Auditorium stage will be

removed, a ramp built, and walls are torn down to create a mini-elevator from the lower level to the sanctuary level.

All of this physical deconstruction has really disrupted life as usual. And it also creates an emotional disruption as we let go of meaningful spaces and live in the uncomfortable place of chaos.

And then we add to that physical deconstruction of our church spaces, we add to that the grief arising from Denise's death. Her death has thrown us into disarray--emotionally as well as logistically as we have had to figure out how to manage the church operations in her absence. Our relatively well ordered congregational life has been dismantled with the loss of special places in our building, the disturbance to our usual ways of conducting our life here, and the loss of a meaningful person in our church family. Things have been taken apart. Deconstruction is happening all around us and the dust is flying.

Goodness knows, we come to church, in part, to find help for dealing with all the forms of deconstruction that occur in the rest of our lives: the death of a family member or the loss of a job, the coming apart of our marriage, a frightening health diagnosis, our children who are in trouble, habits that are destructive or out of control. We come to church each Sunday with the dust of the week still clinging to us from the ways we have been deconstructed by our failures and misdeeds, by the injuries we have experienced to our hearts, and souls and bodies, by the distressing changes to our families and world that we cannot control. We come to church covered in dust only to discover that here too, deconstruction takes place. It is unavoidable.

In many ways, much of the deconstruction taking place in our building is a direct result of the deconstruction of the place of religious activity in our society. Once upon a time all this space in our building was needed for the life and activities of the congregation. But now, we like

many other congregations, have all this under-utilized space to rent to others because of the decline in membership and church involvement. The truth is, deconstruction began a long time ago, decades ago, but the dust, the dust has settled upon us and our generation of church goers. And while we are grateful our buildings can be put to good use for other groups, the deconstruction of the place of the church in society and the deconstruction of our particular building is emotional and stressful and unsettling.

Jesus was not afraid of deconstruction. In fact, the whole reason he came into our world and still comes into lives was because of the various forms of deconstruction that leave us lost, anxious, and unhinged. One kind of deconstruction Jesus addresses is the deconstruction we do to the image of God in which we are made. Each one of us was made to reflect God's goodness and God's love. But we deconstruct that image by the ways we harm ourselves, other people, and our world itself. That's what we mean when we talk about "sin." Sin is really the deconstruction of the image of God in us. The other kind of deconstruction Jesus addresses are those circumstances in life that take us apart at the seams: death, illness, sorrow, and hardship. All the ways that life takes us apart, Jesus comes to bring healing, to bring restoration, to bring life.

We see this in today's reading from Mark. Jesus walks right into two situations of deconstruction and he brings healing and life. First, there is the situation of the dying little girl, who does eventually die. And into the middle of this story, Mark inserts another story, the story about the woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. Mark sandwiches one story inside of the other story because in his mind, these two stories are connected. Both of them have to do with people whose lives have come apart. Both of them are about females, who were devalued members of that society. Both have to do with individuals in need of restoration.

In the first story, a family is in disarray due to the illness and then death of their little girl. This is what death does to us, doesn't it? Death dismantles our families and relationships. It brings upon us emotional, psychological, as well as spiritual disorder. After the death of a loved one, our lives may be a muddle of confusion and turmoil. Dust is flying around us as our lives are deconstructed by the specter of death. And ultimately, death reduces us all to literal dust, as the body itself is deconstructed by the forces of nature.

Jesus walks into the deconstruction zone of this family's pain with specific gifts. Jesus brings into this situation the gifts of love and grace. Now when I talk about love, I refer to the biblical understanding of love which was more than just an emotion but which includes the commitment to the welfare of another. That is God's kind of love. The other gift, the gift of grace is a little more complex. That little word "grace" contains a world of meaning. I think grace is best understood as love, forgiveness, and the power of God's goodness all rolled up into one wondrous package. I include "the power of God's goodness" because sometimes people think of "grace" as something kind of passive. But grace includes the power of God's goodness, which is active and filled with energy. Jesus brings this to bear into this situation of sorrow. He brings the power of God's goodness to raise the little girl to life, to restore the family, to reconstruct what had come apart.

These are the same gifts he uses with the woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. For twelve years this woman had been considered ritually unclean because of her bleeding. Think of that: twelve years where no one would touch her, no one wanted to be near her, or to have her at family gatherings, social or religious events. For all those years, this woman's life had come apart, severing her from any kind of meaningful relationship with others. But she is drawn to Jesus whom she believes can heal her. And so she takes an enormous risk.

She, this unclean woman, reaches out and touches Jesus' garment. This would, in the eyes of her community, make Jesus unclean. But when he discovers what has happened, he is not mad. He is not disgusted by her. He does not reject her. Instead he praises her faith. He allows his grace, the power of God's goodness, to heal this woman of her ailment, but most importantly, to acknowledge her value, her worth, her faith. She is restored to good health and restored to full inclusion in her society.

There is an interesting detail that pops up in both of these stories, and I wonder if you noticed it. It is the number twelve. The little girl, we are told, was twelve years old. The woman who was hemorrhaging had suffered for twelve years from her condition. This detail does not appear by coincidence. The gospel writer Mark included it on purpose. Some scholars suggest that it is there to make us the reader think about the twelve tribes of Israel--that these two stories are intended to symbolize Israel itself. Under Roman oppression, Israel as a nation was suffering. Under Roman rule, Israel as a nation was as good as dead. But that Jesus comes to restore Israel, to heal Israel, to bring Israel back to life. Jesus walks into the deconstruction zone of Israel's collective life to restore them--not with military might, but with the power of God's goodness which confronts and conquers evil and injustice.

As we prepare to celebrate the Fourth of July, we might think of how we too desperately need Jesus to restore and heal and renew our national life. Deep lines of division separate our nation. Hostility and intolerance seem to be growing. Civility seems scarce. Many in our land are left aghast at the abandonment of deeply cherished American values toward compassion and justice. Every day in the news we are provided abundant examples of a society that is coming apart at the seams. And we pray for Jesus come into the dust of our national life with the power of God's goodness to renew and restore and raise us to new life.

That is what Jesus does: he walks into all the dusty places of our lives, into all our deconstruction zones. He joins you and me in our lives where there is turmoil, and disarray, and

where our lives have come apart. Jesus is not afraid of the dust that arises from our guilt, our shame, our pain, or our need. He walks into our living rooms and into our church buildings and into our hearts and souls. He walks into refugee camps and detention centers, into hospital rooms and funeral homes and into all those places where lives are fragmented and in pieces. He walks into the deconstruction of people's lives with the gifts of love and grace, to help put people back together again. When Jesus puts us back together again, however, it is not with the intention of returning us to who we once were. The new construction will be different from the previous. Christ touches you and me with love and grace, as he did the hemorrhaging woman and the little girl, in order to raise us to *new* life, not the old life. Our real healing begins, our new construction is underway, when we can allow Christ's gifts of love and grace to leave their imprint upon our hearts and minds. And then he bids us to follow him in a ministry of touching others with compassion.

In a short while, we will gather around this Table and celebrate the Lord's Supper. This table is where Jesus puts us back together again. It is here where he reconstructs us with the gifts of love and grace. The power of love and the power of God's goodness are given to us, to heal us, forgive us, sustain us through changes and hardships, and to raise us to new life. You see, God quite literally pardons our dust.