

*Echoing in Our Ears: "Do Not Be Afraid"
"What If I Can't Fix It?"*

Luke 4:38-39; *If I Should Have a Daughter*, by Sarah Kay

As you might expect from someone whose work includes a lot of evening meetings, I don't watch much television. But there are two shows that I am definitely hooked on, and try never to miss. One is *The Good Wife*; the other is *Nashville*. *The Good Wife* I can justify. It gets good critical reviews; lots of people think it's well-done. *Nashville*—well, *Nashville* is sort of like television junk food. It's my guilty pleasure; every week I watch overly dramatic country singers—mostly women—make decisions—mostly bad—about their lives and relationships. It's great.

One of the story lines in *Nashville* right now is about a couple of star-crossed lovers—Deacon Claiborne and Rayna James—who finally, after lots of years of missing connections, have found their way back to one another. All is well with them on the love front. But just as they were getting back together, Deacon learned that he has cancer. And in an entirely implausible scenario, he can only be cured by a liver transplant—for whom the only possible donor is the sister he has been estranged from for many years.

Rayna turns herself inside out as she tries to get this sister to get over her anger and help her brother live. Rayna begs; she pleads; she cries; she shows up everywhere this sister goes. She writes her a check for \$1 million, which the sister tears up and mails back to her, Federal Express. In the last scene of this week's episode, the sister turned up at their door, so it may all turn out OK. I'll let you know after the season finale next week.

"Is this sermon material?" you may be asking yourself. I think it is! This picture of someone running around crazily, trying to find something or someone who will heal the person she loves, reminds me both of mothers, who we honor today, and of Peter, whose story we heard just a few minutes ago.

Peter hasn't known Jesus very long at the point Luke puts this event in Jesus' story. In fact, it happens just after Jesus has given his first sermon in his hometown—the one where he says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...and to proclaim that this is the year of the Lord's favor." It was a pretty dramatic day. The congregation who heard Jesus preach—they loved him at first, and then they realized that he was not going to tell them the old-fashioned religion they wanted to hear. So they marched him up to the edge of a cliff and threatened to throw him off—this too could have made good television drama. Please do not try this at your church.

Jesus escaped the crowd and its anger that day. He did a few miracles; people began to think of him as someone who could make sick people well. And then his new friend Peter tugged on his sleeve. "Jesus," he said, "I hate to bother you with this. But my mother-in-law is really sick. Do you think you could come to the house and see what you can do for her?"

I wonder if there was some grumbling among the other disciples about whether it was appropriate for Peter to ask Jesus for a personal favor so early on. I wonder if Peter really believed that Jesus could heal this person he loved. I wonder if Peter was *afraid*—deep into his bones—when he thought about this woman who occupied the center place in his family—steady caregiver, chief cook, much-loved grandmother to his children. If she died, everything would change. Nothing would be as it had been, what it was supposed to be.

And so, Peter was willing to break the rules of propriety to get Jesus to his house. He *needed* Jesus to heal his mother-in-law, and he was willing to be a little annoying, if it would get her healed. He was probably willing to be a *lot* annoying. He would have done anything he needed to--for her, for his family.

This is what family members do for each other. This is what it looks like to love someone in the same way you love yourself. Family is where we learn what it means to love in that selfless way that puts someone else's well-being ahead of your own time, or agenda, or embarrassment. It's the laboratory where we practice—sometimes with success and sometimes not so much—loving someone who lives right inside your heart and yet is separate, other. Loving without controlling. Knowing when to hold on and when to let go; learning what lessons can be taught and which ones every child has to learn from their own experience.

That laboratory—family--is where our greatest successes and our worst mistakes live side by side. Every one of us has been shaped by the family that raised us, sometimes by what they did right and sometimes by the mistakes we hope not to repeat. Often we choose what we want for our lives in response to our early experiences of family.

Richard Rohr says that there are two universal paths to transformation in our lives; just two experiences that are strong enough to get past all our ego defenses and crack us open enough to experience real change. Only two: great love and great suffering. Love, he says, is powerful because it makes us willing to risk everything. When we hold nothing back, when we lean toward another person to entwine our life with theirs, something shifts in us. It opens us—wide enough to overcome our sense of aloneness, and the fear we all carry about being seen fully. Great love can compel us, re-direct our dreams. Parenthood may be the place where we see this most clearly; a baby can change a mother's hopes, rearrange a father's priorities. Love can make us, if only temporarily, voluntarily relinquish control over our lives.

Great suffering interrupts our control over our lives too. It takes us somewhere we had not planned to go. In fact, you could define suffering as a condition that happens against your will. And suffering too can break us open. It exposes something inside of us that is usually protected; it opens up new space inside of us, to be filled with grace or with bitterness. Perhaps you know this from your own life; I know I do.

If you chart the path of your life, I think you will notice occasions when you have felt yourself transformed—when you have changed direction or opened up in some new way. Test this theory: see if those moments correspond with a surge of love or an event that caused you to suffer in some way.

Often, the context for both these things—our greatest loves and our moments of deepest suffering—is family. Family is the location of so many of our intense experiences. Family calls out the best from us and sometimes it prompts the worst. It's where we take extraordinary measures to extend ourselves, and sometimes to protect ourselves. It is filled with the people we are most grateful for, and it is also where tiny seeds of anger and resentment get planted and watered. It is where we learn that life holds all of these contradictions together: love and suffering, kindness and harshness, hurt and forgiveness.

All of it, together. Not just in your family. *Every* family. In our families we learn: not every contradiction will be fixed; not every source of suffering can be healed. Suffering and love can live peaceably alongside of each other. Sometimes they just need to be held, woven together into the whole cloth of our lives.

Jordan discovered a contemporary poem this week, written by an artist named Sarah Kay. I've asked her to read it to you this morning.

If I Should Have a Daughter
(attached)

Not all of us would say beautiful things about our mothers, or our families. Few of us would say those things at every moment. Not every good person is a mother, and not every mother is good. Family is a big, hot, messy mix, that often—just like life—refuses to be fixed. That's what we honor today: love. That fierce, extravagant, unconditional, control-relinquishing kind of love that mothers—and families—do when we're at our best. The kind of love we practice on each other; and when we fail, we keep trying. We stay at it, because it is our best and our most important work.

This is the kind of love that we hope—we pray—will mirror the love God lavishes on all of creation, the love we have received. It's the kind of love we want to be able to give. The kind that casts out fear. The kind of love that—whether we are giving it or receiving it—transforms us.

B (If I Should Have a Daughter)
Sarah Kay

Instead of “Mom”, she’s gonna call me “Point B.” Because that way, she knows that no matter what happens, at least she can always find her way to me. And I’m going to paint the solar system on the back of her hands so that she has to learn the entire universe before she can say “Oh, I know that like the back of my hand.”

She’s gonna learn that this life will hit you, hard, in the face, wait for you to get back up so it can kick you in the stomach. But getting the wind knocked out of you is the only way to remind your lungs how much they like the taste of air. There is hurt, here, that cannot be fixed by band-aids or poetry, so the first time she realizes that Wonder-woman isn’t coming, I’ll make sure she knows she doesn’t have to wear the cape all by herself. Because no matter how wide you stretch your fingers, your hands will always be too small to catch all the pain you want to heal. Believe me, I’ve tried.

And “Baby,” I’ll tell her “don’t keep your nose up in the air like that, I know that trick, you’re just smelling for smoke so you can follow the trail back to a burning house so you can find the boy who lost everything in the fire to see if you can save him. Or else, find the boy who lit the fire in the first place to see if you can change him.”

But I know that she will anyway, so instead I’ll always keep an extra supply of chocolate and rain boots nearby, ‘cause there is no heartbreak that chocolate can’t fix. Okay, there’s a few heartbreaks chocolate can’t fix. But that’s what the rain boots are for, because rain will wash away everything if you let it.

I want her to see the world through the underside of a glass bottom boat, to look through a magnifying glass at the galaxies that exist on the pin point of a human mind. Because that’s how my mom taught me. That there’ll be days like this, “There’ll be days like this my momma said” when you open your hands to catch and wind up with only blisters and bruises. When you step out of the phone booth and try to fly and the very people you wanna save are the ones standing on your cape. When your boots will fill with rain and you’ll be up to your knees in disappointment and those are the very days you have all the more reason to say “thank you,” ‘cause there is nothing more beautiful than the way the ocean refuses to stop kissing the shoreline no matter how many times it’s sent away.

You will put the “wind” in win some lose some, you will put the “star” in starting over and over, and no matter how many land mines erupt in a minute be sure your mind lands on the beauty of this funny place called life.

And yes, on a scale from one to over-trusting I am pretty damn naive but I want her to know that this world is made out of sugar. It can crumble so easily but don’t be afraid to stick your tongue out and taste it.

“Baby,” I’ll tell her “remember your mama is a worrier but your papa is a warrior and you are the girl with small hands and big eyes who never stops asking for more.”

Remember that good things come in threes and so do bad things and always apologize when you've done something wrong but don't you ever apologize for the way your eyes refuse to stop shining.

Your voice is small but don't ever stop singing and when they finally hand you heartbreak, slip hatred and war under your doorstep and hand you hand-outs on street corners of cynicism and defeat, you tell them that they really ought to meet your mother.