

Sermon Pentecost 6, Proper 8, Year A 2024; Gospel Mark 5: 21-43

“God, I pray that you will make me a conduit for your truth. Amen.”

Jairus, the Woman, and the Inclusive Kingdom

Our gospel from Mark today about Jairus' (Ji'-rus) daughter and the hemorrhaging woman is one of the better known stories in scripture. Remember that Jesus has just returned to Jewish territory after the first voyage across the Sea of Galilee into Gentile territory where he encountered the Gerasenes. It was there that he removed the demons from the man called "Legion." Large crowds are now following him around. In today's reading the author of Mark uses his "sandwich" method of telling two stories, that being one story embedded within another. Both of the stories feature someone encountering Jesus in need of healing. In the first that someone is a man named Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, a privileged and powerful man whose 12 year old daughter is sick, at the point of death. He has heard about Jesus, and feels like Jesus can heal his little girl. He seeks out Jesus, falls to his feet, and in desperation says, "Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." They go off together to see her. But then the large crowd following them begins to press in around them. It is then that Mark inserts the second story within the first. I can just imagine the nervous frustration of Jairus as what he hopes will be a hurried trip with Jesus to attend to his daughter is interrupted. This time the person in need is quite different. She is a woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years. According to religious purity codes the blood has made her ritually unclean, and if she touches anyone they too will be made unclean. She is destitute, in poverty because she has spent all her money seeking treatments from numerous physicians, none of which has worked, and she has only gotten worse. She is an outcast. She is powerless, and she is a woman. She has likely lost relationship with family and friends, and she too is desperate. I can picture the scene: this unkempt woman, in her own mind unworthy to speak to the healer Jesus she has heard so much about, slowly and carefully making her way

through the crowd, trying to touch no one, finally reaching the spot where he is standing. If discovered she will be punished, but she decides to take the risk. The crowd notices her, stunned that she would even be there, much less approaching Jesus, gesturing to her and to one another, revealing their shock. “Go away! Don’t touch me!” She cannot speak to Jesus, cannot look into his eyes, but she hesitantly and timidly but also courageously reaches out her hand, and with her fingers barely touches his cloak. Mark tells us that “immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.” Jesus notices something too. He too feels like something has happened, perhaps sensing that his healing power has moved into her. Amidst the chaos, in his usual unhurried, peaceful, and gentle demeanor he asks “Who touched my clothes?” His disciples chide him rudely, but she comes forward in fear and trembling, falls down before him, and tells him the whole truth. Jesus knows the purity codes, knows that she was ritually unclean, and that he too would have been made unclean, but of course he has no concern for that. He once again ignores and violates social and religious barriers, and receives her touch without any rejection. Her healing is made complete when he looks into her eyes, and then he says “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” I can just see her transformation! Now healed, with a look of amazement and gratitude on her face she gets up, walks back through the crowd, away from the loneliness of her status as a dangerous pariah, back into a life of relationship with family and community she had not known for twelve long years of suffering. She has been healed. This nameless permanently outcast woman is restored to social as well as physical wholeness.

We now return to the ending of the first story, that of Jairus’ daughter. People have returned to tell Jairus that his daughter has already died. But Jesus tells the father “Do not fear, only believe.” “What?” Jairus must be thinking, “my daughter is already dead.” Yet they return to Jairus’ house. The scene there is a commotion. People are weeping and wailing loudly because the girl is dead.

Jesus says “Why do you weep....the child is not dead but sleeping.” The crowd laughs at him. He then takes the mother and father to the girls’ bed, takes her hand, and says “Talitha cum,” which is Aramaic for “Little girl, get up!” Mark tells us that “immediately the girl got up and began to walk about.” The little girl is healed, returned to life. The story ends when Jesus tells them to give her something to eat.

Two fascinating stories, both about healing, both about faith, yet with the recipients of Jesus’ healing so different. One a privileged man, the other a destitute ritually unclean outcast woman. There are similarities too: both of the people healed are women, one the daughter of Jairus, the other called “daughter” by Jesus. And both receive new life through the act of touching. In both stories someone seeks out Jesus, and Jesus answers both. In both Jesus stops what he is doing to attend to the need immediately before him. Notice too that Jesus delays his first call by the powerful and privileged man Jairus in order to attend to the need of the powerless socially rejected woman. The wealthy man must wait while Jesus attends to the poor woman.

What is the author of Mark trying to tell us with these two stories? First, in this the 5th chapter of the gospel of Mark, we are in the middle of a series of healings by Jesus. The author is for one thing using miraculous healings to reveal who this Jesus is, that he exercises godlike authority over life and death, health and sickness, clean and unclean. But I think there is more than just that. There are other messages. For one the story holds out comfort for those who cannot or at least don’t think they can march up in public to seek out Jesus directly. It is enough to creep up privately, to simply in solitude and silence ask for what you want, even when you are unsure he will provide it. Here is another. We have heard Jim talk about the importance of resurrection in Mark’s gospel, resurrection being a return to wholeness, or a return to new life, and we see that in the story of the little girl Jesus resurrects. He tells her “talitha cum” the Arabic word meaning “rise up,” in Greek the word “egeiro, (eg-i’-ro)” the same word for

resurrection. Its meaning is closely related to healing, which Westminster's Dictionary of Theological Terms defines as "restoration to health and thus of wholeness or soundness to all aspects of human life."

There is yet another message, and it has to do with what this Kingdom of God looks like, the Kingdom Jesus is trying to usher in. It is an all-inclusive place, one where social status and class means nothing. In the language of liberation theology it is one where there is "preferential option for the poor." The two main characters in the stories today are polar opposites in terms of economic status and honor. Jairus can be seen to represent the power structure which prospers at the expense of the poor who have been oppressed. The destitute woman represents those living in poverty because of that system. The patriarchal system demanded that only men could obtain honor and status, a high position on the social ladder, power and prestige. It precluded women from assertiveness in public life. Women generally lacked what we today would call "rights." This is why it was so courageous for the unnamed outcast woman to even approach Jesus. This is why it is so significant that Jesus stopped his journey to heal the daughter of the privileged Jairus in order to attend to the woman. Jairus the powerful leader of the synagogue, a member of the Jewish ruling class, would have to wait, in fact have to wait until it is too late, for he is soon told that his daughter has died! And yet Jesus does ultimately heal the young girl. His healing has no boundaries. It is all-inclusive. Chad Myers in his book Binding the Strong Man, A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus says that the author of Mark is telling a story that would shock his audience and undermine their sense of social order and propriety. What we see in these stories today is Jesus blatantly breaking the rules of conduct and expectations accepted by the culture, in the process beginning to build a new social order, a glimpse of what God's Kingdom looks like. Jesus is subverting the status quo in order to create new possibilities, new relationships, new community. This emphasis on "the last shall be first" will continue in Mark's gospel in many of his

parables (eg Mark 10: 31). This would have been a radical challenge to the accepted norms of Mark's original audience.

This is also what Mark's gospel is trying to tell us today. It is a radical challenge to many of the leaders of our culture today, including those claiming to be religious leaders. For those who misread the gospel and somehow find passages in it to promote things like Christian nationalism, white supremacy, sexism, exclusivity of any type and other similar misguided ways of thinking, it is a challenge they have not meet. They seem to miss the point, the foundational truth that Jesus tells us, to simply "love your neighbor." And who is your neighbor? As we see in the parable of the Good Samaritan, everybody is! How could it possibly be more clear? How can so many miss it? I like to think that Jesus is probably asking the same question. I believe—I know—that there is truth in the gospel, a truth that we can all find if we look for it, honestly and with humility and vulnerability. Sometimes it hides between the lines, but in other places it is bright and clear. The truth is the light that overcomes the darkness, that darkness that tries to obscure the light, and thereby obscure the truth—the darkness that deceives those who look in the wrong places, or for the wrong reasons, reasons like power and pride and greed. Jesus says flat out that he is "the truth, the light, and the life." May we all look closely at this story of the life of this man Jesus, for I am convinced that if we do we will find what we are looking for and what we need, to be healed, to be made whole, to be resurrected to new life.