

Mark 5:21-43 – A Girl Restored to Life and a Woman Healed

²¹When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. ²²Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet ²³and begged him repeatedly, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.” ²⁴So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. ²⁵Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. ²⁶She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. ²⁷She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” ²⁹Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. ³⁰Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” ³¹And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’ ” ³²He looked all around to see who had done it. ³³But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. ³⁴He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

³⁵While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader’s house to say, “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?” ³⁶But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe.” ³⁷He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. ³⁸When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. ³⁹When he had entered, he said to them, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.” ⁴⁰And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. ⁴¹He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!” ⁴²And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. ⁴³He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Is It Faith, or Is It Mercy?

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Text: *Mark 5:21-43*

This morning's Scripture lesson gives us an example of what is commonly called an *inclusio*. In an *inclusio* a story begins, and then before it ends, here comes another story. And then finally the first story is finished. In this morning's Scripture Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, comes to Jesus and begs for help. His daughter is at the point of death. The man is desperate. Jairus begs Jesus to come lay hands on his daughter and heal her.

Without a word Jesus begins to go with Jairus. There was already a crowd present. There was always a crowd with Jesus, it seems. But when word passed that he was headed to heal a young girl near death, the crowd grew to a multitude. They followed him and pressed in on him. And now the second story begins. ²⁵Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. ²⁶She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. ²⁷She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." And, indeed, the woman was made well immediately. Her hemorrhage stopped. But Jesus knew that someone had touched his cloak. He had felt that power go out from him. And when the woman finally confessed that it was she who had touched his cloak, ³⁴He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

Now we pick up the first story again. Jesus and the throng are headed to Jairus' house. But they are met by members from Jairus' household. They come with very sad words. They say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But Jesus persisted. He went to Jairus' house. And there he found great wailing and weeping. And then Jesus said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." ⁴⁰And they laughed at him. They laughed right in his face. Maybe he could heal the sick, but healing the dead they were sure he could not do. Undeterred, Jesus took the girl by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" ⁴²And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement.

So there you have it, an *inclusio* – a sandwich of sorts, a story in the middle sandwiched between the two parts of another story. And one of the things we know about Jesus is that when he gives us an *inclusio*, he wants us to read one story in the light of the other. And usually he wants us to look for the differences between the two stories, and also for their similarities. He wants us to see that they are similar, but that they are not the same. And he wants us to find the point, or meaning, that is revealed when the stories are interpreted side-by-side.

So what of the striking differences between the two stories, between the story of the woman with a hemorrhage in the story of Jairus' daughter. Of course there are several. And that is part of the treasure hunt. Some of the differences will prove to be irrelevant, but as we look

through them we will find the buried gem. Perhaps the most obvious difference is the one that caused the people to laugh at Jesus. The woman with hemorrhage was sick, but Jairus' daughter had died. It is surely more impressive to raise the dead and than it is to heal the merely sick. But in the end, the difference seems to be one of degree, and not important enough to warrant an inclusio.

Well, let's see. The woman was suffering from a hemorrhage. But we're never told from what Jairus' daughter is suffering. So the difference in their affliction does not seem to be the interesting point, either. The woman is obviously an adult, while Jairus' daughter is a little girl. Indeed, if you noticed the numbers, the woman has suffered for the whole length of time the little girl has been alive, 12 years. But in the end the difference in age does not seem to be that significant, either.

One other difference looks more promising, though. The woman's family is apparently insignificant. We hear nothing of them. Indeed, one imagines that the poor woman has been alone and isolated for very long time. For 12 years she has suffered a hemorrhage, an affliction which in her day would have made her untouchable, an outcast, unclean. Without speculating very far beyond the facts we know, we can be quite certain that this woman was alone in the world. On the other hand, Jairus was leader of the synagogue. He was a recognized and respected member of society. A throng of family and friends gathered at his household on the occasion of his daughter's illness. For Jairus' daughter there were many to worry and to weep. There were many who cared for her. But the interesting thing is that Jesus healed them both. One, the woman, a nobody. The other clearly a somebody. We may be getting warm.

But let's keep going for a minute. There is another difference, too. The woman, an outcast with no one caring for her and no one advocating for her, took it upon herself to work her all the way through the crowd and touch Jesus' cloak. She had great faith that Jesus could make her well. Even after all these years of suffering, the woman had faith that Jesus could heal her. Indeed, Jesus said to her, "Your faith has made you well." On the other hand, faith regarding Jairus' daughter disappears within a moment. We don't know what Jairus really thought of Jesus. But we do know that the leaders of the synagogue were not his best supporters. More often they were his critics. They tried to ensnare him in deadly traps. They thought him a bothersome pretender. Now, maybe Jairus was the exception. Or maybe he was simply a desperate man grasping at straws to save his daughter. Whichever was the case, when it was clear that she was dead, no one seemed to have faith in Jesus that he could do any good, even though he assured them that he could. So, we have another difference of significance. The woman with a hemorrhage had faith in Jesus despite 12 years a disappointment. Jairus' family and friends lost their faith in a flash.

Jesus healed both the woman and the little girl. The woman was a nobody; the little girl came from a family of influence. The woman demonstrated a dogged, unyielding faith; those associated with the little girl seemed to have a desperate longing, but at best an ephemeral faith. There are lots of differences of significance, but despite all of them, Jesus healed them both. This is a bit surprising. Jesus healed people irrespective of station in life or strength of belief.

So many religions today, including some versions our own, say that unless you believe the way they do, unless you have their kind of faith, you are in trouble with God. It is another example of something I find incredibly confounding. I find it confounding that there is so often very little resemblance between the religion that Jesus espouses and the religion that many of his

followers espouse.

Last week we talked about fear, and I think that this is another place where fear plays a part. It may work something like this: We look around the world, and we notice that there is a good deal of pain and suffering. And we look for an explanation; we want to know why bad things happen. In the end, our curiosity is very often self-serving. We want to know why someone else is bad off, perhaps so that we may explain and assure ourselves how we can avoid the same end. If we can explain to ourselves that we are not like that person over there, we are better, we are more holy, we have the right belief, then we feel safer. And more often than not people marshal religion to make their case. If I believe the right thing, I am inoculated from bad outcomes. Indeed, I have heard religious people say that the person lying in bed with cancer would be fine if she would simply get right with God.

Normally, of course, people become a little more sophisticated. They notice that bad things happen to them, or those they love, or those that seem to believe correctly. This was the problem Job faced. Job knew that he was upstanding. Job knew that he was right with God. Job knew that he did not deserve the afflictions that befell him. Job was so sure, that he was ready to litigate. Job wanted to take God to court, to have an impartial judge render a decision. The more common reaction to Job's situation, though, takes less risk of offending God. Many people who suffer in the present day and are sure they do not deserve it believe that they will receive their just reward in the next life.

Look at all the gyrations we make in order to believe that it is those who believe correctly will be rewarded, and it is those who believe incorrectly who will be punished. But if we look back at the stories of Jesus, we cannot help but notice that this is not how Jesus thinks. The little girl's family and friends demonstrated a paper-thin faith, and yet Jesus was willing to heal her just as readily as he was the woman whose faith had withstood 12 years of disappointment. The message is clear. You don't have to pass a faith test, you don't have to be a theologian, you don't have to do anything to be held in the loving embrace of God. God's love forms a circle far wider than is very often supposed. We cannot even comprehend its border.

There is a related problem, a problem in which the logic is quite similar. It is the problem of station in life. Unlike the bad things that seem to happen quickly or out of the blue, station in life is a more long-term situation. But here again we often search for explanations. We want to believe that people deserve what they get. Much of the American ideal is built around this notion. Work hard, take responsibility, keep your nose clean, and you will get what you deserve. And for those few cases that don't quite add up, we come up with language such as the deserving poor, that is, those who are poor and downtrodden but who we are convinced deserve better. But the real message is that for the most part those whose lives are a mess don't deserve any better. They are the undeserving poor.

Much of our political and free-market systems have at their heart the built in theological perspective that God takes care of those who do it right and neglects or punishes those who do it wrong. It is a powerful logic, and it persuades many. But it does not persuade Jesus. Faith, getting it right, bowing to the right God, do not seem to be prerequisites to God's mercy, at least according to Jesus they are not. Is it faith, or is it mercy? With Jesus, the emphasis decidedly falls on the latter.

Now, before a close, I want to take a look at the other side of the coin for just a minute. Things left as I have so far argued them, I am out of a job and have little good reason to urge you

to take up the life of faith or to come to church, or to live that upstanding life. And you know that I can't leave you there.

If God's mercy extends in an infinite radius, then what purpose is served in trying to live right, or in cultivating religious faith? The truth of the matter is that our actions and our beliefs have an enormous impact on both ourselves and others. I suppose that what we are trying to get our minds around is a universe that is more complicated than we would like it to be. And I plan to take this topic up in more detail in a series of upcoming sermons. For now, suffice it to say that living a good and upstanding life quite clearly contributes not only to one's own happiness and well-being, but also to that of others. If I rob a store and shoot people, I have brought great suffering into other people's lives. And in all likelihood I have made my own life worse, too. For now I am on the run; I am filled with guilt; I will never be the same. But it would be a mistake to conclude that the man I shot deserved what he got. And it would also be a mistake to conclude that I was no longer contained in the circle of God's love.

Similarly, a life of religious faith and practice has many benefits. It settles the heart and soul and mind. It allows one to apprehend the presence of God in a more palpable way. It helps quell the fears and quench the thirsts of human existence. But the one thing it does not do is increase your odds in the lottery for God's love. For in that lottery your chances of winning are already 100%.

At the end of the day God loves us so much that the holy one wishes the best for us, including a life of faith and the life of upstanding moral character. But even when we fail in these matters, God is there reaching out to heal us, for that is the nature of God. Thanks be to God whose mercy exceeds what we justly deserve and who loves us no matter who we are or how certainly we believe. Amen.

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