

TWOFER TWELVE HEALING

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

June 14, 2009

Scripture: Psalm 20; Mark 5:21-43

On at least two occasions in his gospel, Mark edits the story in such a way that two events are told at one time, thus allowing both to bring out each other's texture and meaning. By juxtaposing the two stories one plays off the other, highlighting by contrast their likeness and dissimilarity. This is true in today's lesson in which the healing of a woman with a hemorrhage is sandwiched into the story of the raising of Jairus' daughter.

In the first story today we hear about Jairus, an esteemed member of the synagogue who came to Jesus and begged him to heal his daughter who lay near death. With just that much, Jesus dropped what he was doing and began to accompany Jairus to his home.

Now let me say in passing, that Jairus is notable in this story for at least three reasons. First he has a name, and when you contrast that fact with the woman with the hemorrhage (who has no name) you have an insight into the dynamics of First Century power and the place of women in the culture. That's a sermon in itself, but it's at least worth noting that Jairus has a name while neither his daughter nor the woman with the hemorrhage do.

Secondly, you can't help but empathize with the desperation of this man's predicament. The fact that he is the little girl's father and not her mother tells you something about his confusion about how best to be helpful. I envision Jairus' wife as unwilling to leave the bedside of her daughter. She needs to be there to stroke the girl's hair, to hold the glass close to her lips, to moisten the washcloth for her forehead. The father on the other hand, like any father, is out at the nurse's station, calling the doctor on his cell phone, pacing up and down the hall, trying to get some leverage with somebody to pay attention to the desperate situation before which he feels helpless. And nothing feels worse to any of us, men or women, than feeling helpless.

So Jairus does what any self respecting father could and would do, he goes to a man he has heard has healing power and begs him to come and save his child. He is at the end of his rope, his last hope is a faith healer about whom there is controversy in the synagogue; but he is willing to go even to Jesus for help.

And that leads to the last thing I want to mention about Jairus which is that his faith is not the most prominent factor in his appeal to Jesus. The way I read the story it's his desperation that really motivates him, his fear of the loss of his daughter, his sense of helplessness, his urge to be useful in the restoration of his daughter's health, she who is as life itself to him. So he reaches out to Jesus, "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." This is faith, but it is faith *in extremis*; faith pushed to the wall and without alternative.

Now on the way to Jairus' house, there was a woman lurking in the crowd, a woman with her own problems, her own fear, her own sense of frustration and desperation and isolation.

She had endured much, Mark says, under many physicians, and had spent all her money on getting well, and still she was no better. I have a lot of empathy for this woman, and I mean no ill toward the physicians in the congregation, but there are times when a person just can't seem to make a dent in a doctor's armor, especially a woman. Either she is considered hysterical, or her symptoms are too vague, or she is a mixture of complaints so general and so abundant that it's hard to sort out what is really going on with her. She had endured much, however, Mark tells us, under many physicians and had spent all her money to no avail.

Can you imagine what it was like to be this woman? Suffering from a disease that we might understand today as endometriosis or dysmenorrhea, she had what male ministers are delicately told are "female problems." So whatever condition she had, she suffered not only physical symptoms, but also pain, and social and religious ostracism. The book of Leviticus puts it succinctly:

If a woman has a discharge of many days, not at the time of her impurity [and that word alone says a lot], ...all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness... Every bed on which she lies... and everything on which she sits shall be unclean... And whoever touches these things shall be unclean, and shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the evening. (Lev. 15:25ff.)

What is it like to be so rejected by society and by your religious community that even the pew on which you sit will defile everyone who shares it with you? Such a self understanding would take its toll on you, immediately of course, and over time shape all that you are. After twelve years of that, you would have learned to hang out in the shadows and blend into the woodwork and never draw attention to yourself.

I shall never forget a man I knew who when he received the positive results of his HIV test said that the only word that came to mind for him was, "unclean."

On the day that Jesus was back in town she must have put a scarf all the way around her head, covered everything but her eyes, in the Middle Eastern way, and gone out of her house like an assassin stalking her prey in the crowd, looking for the opportune moment to commit her crime.

When Jesus and Jairus came by, she saw her opportunity. She moved forward unnoticed because of her veil, and when Jesus passed within arm's length, she reached for the hem of his cloak. At that moment, Mark says, she was healed and the hemorrhage stopped, and Jesus realized that power had gone out of him.

And I can understand that, can't you? It surely must be that way when a surgeon leaves the operating table, or when a psychiatrist finishes a session with a patient, that feeling of weariness, that sense that power has gone out of you. Sometimes when you

rub your hands together and hold them close, but separate, you feel the emanation of the power that still connects. It must have been something like that.

Sensing that power had gone forth from him, Jesus stopped and asked, “Who touched my clothes?” The crowd thought it absurd that he would ask such a question. “Can’t you see that we’re all crowded in here together, how can you ask, ‘Who touched me?’” But the woman, knowing what she had done, and knowing, too that she had broken convention, violated the prohibitions of the law, fell to her knees before Jesus and confessed that it was she who had touched him.

And Jesus, taking compassion on her said, “Daughter, [daughter], your faith has made you well; go in peace.” And with just that much, not only did this woman receive healing, but also restoration to the community. Jesus calls her “daughter.” She is welcomed back to the fold and received as an honored and respected member, as a Daughter of Israel.

Jesus didn’t even say, “Go and wash yourself according to the requirements.” Just, “Daughter, your faith has made you well.” And with that, twelve years of grief and fear and isolation and loneliness and desperation fell away. You think the healing was amazing? So was the restoration to her community!

Now while this was going on, word came that Jairus’ daughter had died. And some of the people around Jesus said, “Well let’s go home then, there’s nothing more to be done about the little girl. Let’s let the father grieve and we’ll bring over some casseroles and some flowers and pay our respects.

But Jesus said, “Do not fear, only believe.” When they got to the house, everybody was there in the room around the little girl and there was weeping and wringing of hands. There was no consoling the mother and the neighbors and friends who had known this little girl. They were heartbroken.

Jesus said, why are you all weeping and making such a racket? She is not dead, she is only sleeping.” And Mark says they all laughed at him. They all laughed at him! Which is a statement not so much about what Jesus said, but about what the crowd saw. The little girl was dead, and everybody knows that dead is dead, just look for yourself. Which is to say, everybody but Jesus saw that.

So he cleared the room and sent all the mourners out, because in the delivery room you don’t want a lot of people standing around crying, but rather people who are prepared to welcome a new beginning. And Jesus took the hand of the little girl, which is another point in this story where the religious law and ritual was being broken, because a righteous Jew in Jesus’ time did not touch the dead.

Jesus took her hand and said, *Talitha cum*, little lamb stand up, which Mark translates for us as meaning, “Little girl, get up.” And immediately, Mark says, she got up and began to walk about, and Jesus said, “Don’t tell anyone about this,” which is really laughable since all the mourners were just outside in another room listening at the door. And then he ordered them to give the little girl something to eat.

Now these are two very powerful stories. The story of a girl who died at the age of twelve and who was brought back to life, and the story of a woman who had suffered with a debilitating and ostracizing condition for twelve years. A twelve year twofer, if you will.

And of all the points of entry that we might have to this story, the one that I want to grab a hold of is the faith described in these two accounts and the power of that faith to shine the light and the love of the resurrection on people who were not quite sure what they needed most, but who decided nonetheless to take a chance on Jesus to overcome the oppressive power of death and disbelief that had gripped their lives.

What is particularly interesting to me is that in the case of both Jairus and the woman with the hemorrhage they were really grasping at straws, they were at their wits end, driven by desperation as much as anything. They had nothing to lose, so they reached out for help.

The first thing, then, I take from these healing stories is that God can use even the slightest thread of hope, the slimmest sliver of light, the most fragile shred of faith that is still there and do more with it than we have ever imagined possible. In other words, our faith does not need to be refined, or eloquent, or shaped in the traditional verbiage of the creeds to be worthy of notice. I think God hears every sigh as a prayer, every deep and heartfelt longing as an intercession, even if it comes only because we have nowhere else to turn.

The second thing that these stories lift up comes in that scene in the room where the crowd and relatives and neighbors have gathered and Jairus' daughter is lying on the bed lifeless. And Jesus comes into the room and says "Stop crying, she is not dead she is only asleep." And they laughed at him. And in that laughter, heaven and earth touch. In that laughter the assumptions of the world are shattered by the loving and living power of God.

Do you remember when Sarah was told that in her old age she would become the mother of a great nation, even in her nineties? She laughed in disbelief. Because she did not yet understand that the possibilities of this earth are shattered by the loving and living power of God.

Jesus appears to be the only person in that little girl's room who doesn't understand that there is no hope here. They all look at the girl and say she is dead. He looks at her and says she is only sleeping. Why is that? What is it that he sees that all the others do not?

He sees things the way God sees things. He sees with resurrection eyes. Everybody else is looking with eyes fixed on earthly time. Jesus is looking at time from the perspective of eternity.

What's happening here is what one scholar has described as a clash of epistemologies. Two world views that are in conflict. One is the *what you see is what you get* perspective on life, the hard nosed reality of a harsh world where the fittest

survive and the devil take the hindmost. A world in which the rules are fixed and unmovable. *A day's pay for a day's work*, we say. *You earn what you get and you get what you pay for*. A world in which nothing is easy, and the dead are dead when they are dead, and that's that.

Over against that view of life is another perspective that while there is no denying the realities of life there is something more, there is a God who means us well, who loves us with a love that will not let us go, and who in the end is victorious over all things, even death itself. The world laughs at that confidence, that faith we hold which is not self evident, that God is God and in the end love is greater than hate, and the power of heaven is greater than all the powers of earth.

Which brings me to the last thing I want to say about these stories of healing. There are some things that we have to surrender to God, some things, this side of heaven that are greater than this world can bear, that we may not see resolved or answered or set to rest in our lifetime but that are nonetheless, not forgotten and are entrusted to God's care.

The woman with the hemorrhage received her healing. Jairus' daughter was raised from the dead. But not all of our fondest hopes and dearest prayers, even our most desperate longings are fulfilled this side of heaven. Some are vouched safe to God, but not forgotten, or lost, or ultimately unanswered. To the eyes of faith they are entrusted to hands more tender than ours and to a love deeper and broader than our own.

I am grateful to Tom Long for reminding me of this remembrance about the late President of France, Charles DeGaulle. We think of DeGaulle as a war hero, a head of state, but what is not usually known about him is that he and his wife Yvonne were parents of a daughter Anne, who had Downes Syndrome. Every day, regardless of what affairs of state were going on, he and Yvonne would come and play with this child. And then they would put her to bed, and Yvonne would say every night, "O Charles, why couldn't she have been like the others? I have prayed so often that she could have been like the others."

When Anne died. They had a private Catholic graveside Mass. When the Mass was over Charles left the grave, but Yvonne could not pull herself away in her grief. And so Charles went back and touched her elbow. "Come Yvonne, did you not hear the gospel? She's now like the others. She's now like the others."¹

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¹ Thomas J. Long, Currie Lectures, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 2009. Lecture #3, "In The Midst of the Congregation." Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas.