

**5 Pentecost
June 27, 2021**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

Our reading from Mark's gospel this morning gives us a story of two daughters ... two children ... two children of God. One, a little girl on her deathbed, with an influential father to advocate for her. The other, an impoverished woman whose long illness has pushed her to the margins of society.

These two stories are linked. The story of Jairus's daughter acts like the bread of a sandwich, with the story of the older woman as the filling. Both stories mention twelve years. Both stories are about healing. So, why did the author of Mark's gospel choose to tell their stories this way? What is trying to be said beyond the healing of two very sick people?

Like many stories in the Gospels, this one begins on the beach. Jesus and his disciples have just recrossed the Sea of Galilee. They have hardly stepped off the boat when Jairus, a leader of the local synagogue, pushes through the crowd, falls at Jesus's feet, and begs Jesus to heal his twelve-year-old daughter. Jesus agrees. As he, his disciples, and Jairus make their way to the synagogue leader's house, a woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years pushes her way through the crowd, stretches out her hand, and almost secretly touches Jesus's cloak.

Immediately, her bleeding stops, and she feels within her body that she is healed. At the same moment, Jesus recognizes that power has gone out of his body. "Who touched my clothes?" he asks, turning to face the crowd of people behind him. It's a ridiculous question; he's being jostled from all sides. But Jesus won't budge. "Who touched my clothes?"

This story centers around the embodied experiences of a girl and a woman. A girl who falls ill ... a woman who bleeds. A daughter who suffers and dies too soon ... a daughter who's personal and intimate bodily suffering renders her an outcast in her community.

If you are a parent whose child has ever been seriously ill, then I imagine that your empathy for Jairus knows no bounds as you reflect on this Gospel story. I am guessing that by the time the synagogue leader approaches Jesus, he has tried every medical and spiritual option available to save his child. He has pleaded with physicians. He has asked his colleagues and congregants to pray. He has used his considerable influence in the community to seek out innovative options. He has spent time and money without measure to find a solution. All to no avail. His daughter is on her deathbed, and Jairus is desperate.

My son Christopher was just twelve years old when an auto accident put him in a coma with broken bones on every limb of his body. He went through puberty in a body cast. He slowly woke up to a different life than he had imagined for himself ... and so did I as his Dad.

I can feel in my own body the desperation that compels Jarius to throw professional caution aside and fall at Jesus's feet ... even when Jesus may have been seen as "heretical" to some in the synagogue where Jarius is the leader. I can imagine that for Jarius hope is battling with despair ... doubt is warring with trust ... courage is fighting with fear. I can imagine it ... because I've been there.

I can visualize the way Jarius shoves and shouts his way through the over-sized crowd ... falling at his feet ... and asking Jesus again and again to please, please, please hurry. And, I can feel all too well the turmoil that erupts within him when Jesus ... for no sensible reason whatsoever ... suddenly stops. Right then, at the worst possible moment, when every microsecond matters ... Jesus stops. And what did he stop for? To ask a ludicrous and wholly irrelevant question: "Who touched my clothes?"

The story really doesn't tell us about Jarius at this moment, but I think I know it well. Dr. Fulghum would not answer my page. Over and over again I paged him ... for hours as I watched what life Christopher had seem to slip away. The monitors connect to his body were moving in the wrong direction ... slower heart beat ... slower breathing rate ... lower blood pressure. I am sure I cried and maybe screamed ... wanting to believe that relief was close at hand ... yet it was so far out of reach. Dr. Fulghum would not answer his page.

Like it or not, I had to wait. And, in this story, Jarius learns to wait ... to trust ... to breathe ... to hang on ... even to the moment when all seems lost. Even in a circumstance when Jesus makes no apparent sense. Then Jarius receives word that his beloved child is dead, and he has to sit with the soul-crushing, mind-boggling question we all face at one time or another: "Jesus, why did you delay?"

So let's fast-forward several minutes. Once the "interruption" of the bleeding woman is over, Jarius and Jesus continue on to the house, and Jarius has to learn about faith in a way that he could not learn any other way. He learns about a faith that withstands the worst news a parent can hear ... a faith that holds steady in the face of mocking, disbelieving laughter ... a faith that holds steady when despair screams ... a faith that trusts an absurd and impossible word from Jesus: "She is not dead but sleeping" ... a faith to keep living in the valley of death.

Let's pause here and consider the other daughter in this story. According to Mark, this daughter has been bleeding for twelve years. Her condition renders her ritually unclean, which means she can't enter the synagogue ... she can't be a part of her spiritual community ... she can't touch or be touched by anyone without rendering them ritually unclean as well. By the time she approaches Jesus, she has spent every penny she owns, enduring much under many physicians, but her bleeding has only worsened. The woman's very body ... its femaleness ... her feminine identity ... has become a source of isolation and disgrace. She is an outcast in her

community forced to live on the edge ... on the margin ... on the boundary. She is excommunicated. She is seen as an embarrassment ... an exile ... and she probably has come to see herself that way as well. I can only imagine how lonely she must feel ... lonely beyond description.

Given this context, it is clear that what the woman does in approaching Jesus is a desperate and stunning act of civil disobedience. She knows she has no business polluting the crowds with her presence. She knows she is forbidden to touch other people. She knows that even her fingertips on Jesus's cloak will defile him. Yet, she still reaches out and touches him, anyway.

Now, if the story ended there ... with a stolen touch ... her healing ... and an invisible but still potent transformation of the woman's life ... it would be considered a miracle. However, Jesus invites more ... he insists on more. He insists that the woman, terrified though she is, comes forward and tells her story ... and she tells him the "whole truth."

Jesus knows that this daughter has spent twelve long years having other people impose their projections on her ... their interpretations ... their assumptions ... their prejudices. He knows that she has been reduced to a stereotype. She is shamed into silence by bad religion ... denied the spiritual nourishment and empowerment that is her birthright as a child of God. She needs someone to listen ... to understand ... and to bless her "whole truth" in the presence of the larger community.

So, this is what Jesus does ... even when time is of the essence. He pauses to restore a broken woman to fellowship... to restore her dignity ... and restore to her humanity. He insists that her experience is no less important than a synagogue leader's experience. Jesus doesn't allow this woman to slink away into obscurity. Instead, he invites her to bear witness ... to find her voice ... to speak publicly and confidently about her story ... her "whole truth" of being a pariah in her own community. "Daughter," Jesus says when she falls silent. "Daughter, go in peace."

Two daughters ... two children of God. Two references to "twelve years." Two people who push through physical barriers and religious prohibitions to reach Jesus. So, why link these rather different lives together?

This is just my speculation, but I wonder what Jairus ... the synagogue leader ... an ultimate religious insider ... experiences as he watches Jesus embrace and empower a bleeding, ritually unclean woman ... Jairus's polar opposite ... the ultimate religious outsider. I wonder if Jairus recognizes his own role ... as an enforcer of the synagogue's religious ritual restrictions ... in the woman's isolation and suffering. I wonder if he experiences a leveling ... a reordering of who is "in" and who is "out" ... in God's ordering of who comes first and who comes last. I wonder if Jairus comes to understand that this woman's worth ... in the eyes of God ... is the same as his worth or the worth of his daughter.

Yes, this may just be my speculation, but I wonder if Jairus flinches when he realizes that the woman in the crowd has made Jesus ritually unclean by touching him. I wonder if he marvels at

the fact that Jesus is wholly unconcerned with his own ritual purity, and that he proceeds straight to Jairus's house anyway, bringing his "uncleanness" with him. I wonder if Jairus learns about the importance of women's voices. I wonder if he learns about the healing power of compassion.

We don't know ... but I hope so. I hope that when Jairus embraces his resurrected daughter, he also embraces a new vision of who God is, and what God values. In Jairus's story, Jesus demands that we not see death where Jesus sees life. In the bleeding woman's story, Jesus demands that legalism gives way to love ... that the ways of the world surrenders to love in every case ... every single time. In each story, Jesus restores a lost child of God to community and intimacy and new life. In each story, Jesus embraces what is "impure" in order to practice mercy.

So, the question for us is ... What is "asleep" in us that Jesus might awaken? What do we have to push through what boundary do we have to cross ... what taboo do we have to break in order to grab hold of God's boundless compassion? What hierarchies, prohibitions, and skepticisms stand in our way? And finally, what is our "whole truth," and when will we find the courage to tell it?

These are ancient and ever-living questions ... and they are our questions. May we ask them ... face them ... love them ... and live into them.

Amen.