

PENTECOST VI, 2018

Mark 5.21-43

This Gospel reading is a miracle story inside a miracle story. It is in three parts: parts one and three are about the healing of the daughter of Jairus; part two is the healing of a woman who had a condition of uncontrolled bleeding. The theme through both of them is God's compassion for all people and His power over suffering and death.

Let us begin with a few comments on Jesus' miracles in general. In our time people tend to focus on the mechanics of the miracles: *How* did Jesus do it? Our scientific mindset discounts miracles in the Bible as superstitions, irrelevant to us today.

But in the Gospel of Mark, the miracles of Jesus are in themselves not the main focus. They were not proof of Jesus' divinity or the basis for faith. I once prepared a chart of the miracles in Mark's Gospel, showing each miracle and how people responded to it. In no case after Jesus did a miracle did people respond by coming to faith in Jesus or confessing Him as Christ, the Son of God – which in Mark's Gospel is Jesus' true identity. When Jesus performs a miracle, people are amazed, bewildered, fearful, or wonder what's happening. Some even accuse Jesus of being possessed by the devil. But never do people respond with faith or the true confession of who Jesus is.

So the miracles of Jesus in themselves are ambiguous. Which means, the real action, the real point of the story is what goes on around the actual event of the miracle.

In our reading today, Jesus is traveling through Galilee. He has just cured a man of demon possession. Crowds follow Him. A man comes up to Jesus: Jairus, the head of the local synagogue. He is an important man, but now he is afraid. His little girl lies on the point of death. He begs Jesus to come and heal her. Jesus agrees, and they head off together, with a crowd of people continuing to surround Jesus.

One of the people in the crowd is a woman who has been suffering from a medical condition for many years. It is some form of uncontrolled bleeding. She has bounced from doctor to doctor, hospital to hospital, with no success. Her health plans have run out of money to help her. Now, she sees the possibility of a cure. She reaches out, touches the hem of Jesus' robe, and is healed.

Jesus, the text says, felt the divine power go out of Him. He finds out who did this. The woman comes forward, very fearful. Her act had broken social rules governing men and women, one of which was a woman never approached, let alone touched, a man not of her own family. She confesses to Jesus what she did and, rather than rebuking her, Jesus commends her for her faith.

The text returns to the story of Jairus and his daughter. Jesus enters the house, takes the girl by the hand, heals her, and returns her to her father. And everyone is amazed. Not believing, but amazed. "Who is this guy?" they wonder.

This whole reading is such a wonderful, human story. There is so much to take from it for our life in faith.

To begin with, we see here two desperate people. One is an important person; the other a nobody. But they are both united by suffering: one for his daughter, the other for an unending health issue. That is the common human denominator: suffering. It happens to us all. Rich or poor, powerful or not, educated or not, no matter what the sex, race, ethnic group, or nationality. Suffering comes to us all. It is more important to understand people in terms of what they suffer than any other viewpoint (Bonhoeffer).

And, our God is a God who responds to human suffering. The Lord does not stand off from the suffering of people; in Christ God came to bear our sorrows and bring healing and hope to people's lives. That is the real miracle: an event where people experience the power and presence of God in Christ, which gives them healing and hope.

Second, both Jairus and the woman are not only united by suffering; they are both desperate. Jairus is desperate for the life of his daughter. The woman is desperate for herself, because time and again she has been frustrated in trying to find a cure. So they both resort to desperate measures. Jairus begs Jesus to help him. The woman dares to defy social propriety by touching a man not of her family.

Which makes me want to ask the question: What would you do, if you were in the same situation? If it was your child's life at stake, what would you do? To what lengths would you go, to save your child's life? Or your own life, if you were in the same situation as the woman in the story? What would you do?

I can't help but connect what is happening in our Gospel reading with the situation of so many families on our southern border. So many of them, too, are stories of desperation: People fleeing starvation, threats to their lives, oppression from their governments. I don't have answers to the problems of immigration. But I am not going to stand off in judgment of people for trying to make a better life, or just to save their lives, who face desperate situations. And the Bible story is a story of a God who hears the cries of the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable, who has compassion for the suffering, and who offers hope. So we should pray that a way may be found to deliver people out of their desperation and find a better life.

From another viewpoint: our reading today is a study in contrasts. On the one hand, there is Jairus. He is an important man. He has an honored place in society. He is no doubt a person of some wealth. Life has been good to him. He is what people would call a "success." On the other hand, there is the woman with a medical condition. She is poor. She is of no status. She has no power. She is the kind of person people prefer not to look at or bother with.

Jairus, being a man of some significance in his society, can come and ask Jesus to help him. But the woman cannot; she dare not try to ask a favor from Jesus. But if only she can touch his garment, she may experience Jesus' healing power. Which she does. And in the ensuing conversation, Jesus

commends her for her faith and pronounces her completely clean and well.

The point of the story: The Lord our God does not just care for the privileged people of society. His grace and mercy are wide enough for everyone. Just so, the wider we open our arms to God and others, the more others and we are blessed.

The story is also a paradigm for ministry. Like the woman touching the hem of Jesus' robe, we bring salvation and healing to people's lives by keeping people in contact with Christ through His Church. In the Gospels, healing often happens by Jesus touching people or people touching Jesus. The story tells us that, first, we will find healing and wholeness by touching the Body of Christ, His Church. Likewise, we can bring healing and wholeness to people's lives by, as the Body of Christ, touching them.

Let me put it the way one person has said it: In the incarnation God has given us the power to keep ourselves, each other, and other people out of hell. For, as long as a person is in touch with the Church, they are in touch with Jesus. Therefore, they have the promise of salvation.

How does this work? For us in the Church, we stay in touch with Christ through hearing His Word and receiving Him in the sacraments, through prayer, and mutually supporting each other. For those outside the Church, we can pray for them, stay in relationship with them and wait for opportunities to share the story of Christ with them. Do not pursue them; be available to them.

To give a concrete example, one I often encounter with parents who are anxious because their children no longer participate in the life of the Church: as long as you continue to love that person, pray for that person, forgive that person, you are holding that person to the Body of Christ. They are "touching the hem of Jesus' robe" (R. Rolheiser). It is the touch of Christ, which gives healing, life, and salvation for all. Amen.