

The Immediacy of Faith

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Mark 5:21-43

As I mentioned last Sunday, I participated in an online preaching seminar in the past week, which I found to be very helpful. A workshop leader, a seminary preaching professor, reminded us that we tend to confine the Bible by reading it only in church. To paraphrase her, the Bible is meant not only to be read *in* the church and *by* the church, but *in* the world and *for* the world. And, I would add, not only by we minister types, but by and for all of us.

It was also a creative reminder, that is, by reading the passage, the text, in a variety of places, one gains new perspective. Just as this space looks different at various times of the day depending on the light and shadows, so does a text “look” different if you read it, encounter it, in a variety of places.

I could make this entire morning’s conversation about just this, the ways we confine the Bible and the ways the Bible can be open to us if we didn’t work so hard to constrict it. But for now, let me commend something to you that was commended to us. Since we are still printing the biblical passages in the bulletin for now, take the bulletin home this afternoon and read what I’ve just read – this lengthy, extraordinary, complex passage from Mark’s gospel – in a handful of places. Indoors and outdoors. Morning and evening. Sitting and standing. Aloud and silently.

I did that this week, with this passage from Mark’s gospel, and while I can’t commit to doing it every week, I can attest that doing so bears fruit. It is either one long narrative with two parts or two narratives that have been stitched together. Scholars disagree. I can’t help but think that it’s of a whole, as you will see. Scholars call it a “Markan” sandwich – the “bread” being one episode in two parts and the “inside,” the peanut butter or ham or whatever, being another episode whose urgency relies on the other.

Different places, different settings, allowed this passage to influence me differently, more deeply.

I read it in front of the ***Springfield Township Administration Building***, just down the road from here, that many of you drive by every day. It's a place that represents power and authority. Jairus is a leader of the synagogue. We don't know what his work was, his role, but even from this description, we knew he had power, authority, influence. So that when Jesus gets off of the boat – presumably the same boat he was in a week ago as he calmed the raging storm – when he gets off the boat, this powerful man is waiting for him.

Except.....in this instance he has no power. He falls at the feet of Jesus, desperate, begging, not for his own life, but for the life of his daughter. She is ill, critically ill at the point of death. "Come and lay your hands on her," he begs. Remember that – hands, touch. And Jesus agrees to see the little girl, the crowd, we are told, following and "pressing" in on him. Remember that – more touch.

Think of that father – a leader, familiar with being in charge, one for whom the system has worked to his advantage. Yet here, desperate, desperate enough to set that power aside and throw himself at the feet of this healer, an anxious man – who could walk comfortably in the front door of a government building without fear – an anxious man willing to do anything for the sake of his dying daughter.

I read this story just next door, in front of ***Chestnut Hill Hospital***. As Jesus is walking to save the little girl, the growing crowd pressing in on him, we meet a woman, an unnamed woman, who had been suffering from hemorrhaging, bleeding, for twelve years. She remains even today a biblical icon to me, one of many unnamed people – many of them women – who encounter Jesus and are transformed and in turn transform him. Twelve years she has been bleeding, and not just bleeding, but hemorrhaging.

Reading this story in front of the hospital reminded me of so many who go there for healing, some successfully, some not so much. She would have been in that second category, we are told, having "endured" many physicians and having spent all of her money. We can imagine more clearly that woman, going from doctor to doctor, with shaky health coverage. Was she dismissed because she was a woman? Was she dismissed because she lacked power and influence? Was she

taken seriously, perhaps, and her condition, her illness, was just too difficult to cure, and getting worse?

The civil rights leader Prathia Hall wrote that “We learn ... how often (women) are taken for granted by the medical establishment. They are told that their problem is in their heads. They spend their money to get proper diagnosis and treatment, often finding out too late what their problem is. This is an outrageous social injustice. We do not know from the text all the details of the bleeding woman's infirmity, but what we do know helps to give insight into what women go through in our own time.”

It's not fair to compare desperation, but her desperation and that of Jairus', the father of the deathly-ill daughter, abide together. She was so desperate that, as part of the crowd pressing in on Jesus, she touched his cloak, his robe, uninvited, unexpected, unanticipated, unbeknownst.

We could spend all morning and more exploring just this moment, but to read the story in front of a hospital helps to focus it. This woman was a woman, and therefore already a second-class citizen. And she was bleeding, menstruating, and therefore ritually unclean, and not just ritually unclean for a certain period of a month, with cleaning rituals prescribed to welcome her back, but ritually unclean for twelve years, and therefore ostracized. And, by touching Jesus, she made him unclean, let alone the countless people in that crowd. Hers was a great risk in reaching out.

Scott Hoezee writes: “This woman had a condition that according to ancient law made her an outcast. For the good of all, she needed to remain far away from other people because so long as her problem persisted, she carried the contagion of unholiness. Touch this woman or be touched by her, and you couldn't go to God's Temple for a week. In other words, if it becomes known that she was putting the community at risk, she could be stoned to death. She's been socially dead for a dozen years now and although people might feel bad about that, there wasn't anything they could do about it.”

Yet she reaches out and touches his clothing. Remember that, again – touch. And *immediately*, one of Mark's favorite words – “immediately” – her hemorrhaging stopped. She is healed. Jesus did not do anything, but he knows something has happened. He is aware that power has gone out from him, healing power. So he stops and asks the crowd what has happened. Jairus must have been impatient at

this interruption, this delay on the way to his daughter. Still, Jesus stops and asks. No one responds, until the woman comes forward and falls at his feet and tells him everything, the “whole truth,” we are told. “Daughter,” he says – remember that word, “daughter,” a term of familiar relationship and not ostracism, a spiritual term juxtaposed with Jairus’ birth daughter – “daughter, your faith has made you well.”

This portion of the passage, worth encountering adjacent to a hospital, could also take a whole lifetime to explore. Candida Moss writes that at least this narrative “inverts the traditional medical power in which a physician imparts healing to a patient.” But more than that, to paraphrase Ross, it upends notions of power and weakness, the woman’s, to be sure, and Jesus’, as power flows from him.

I read this story in front of the *Jenks School*, just down the street from us. The little girl, the powerful man’s daughter, was 12, as many years as the unnamed, now healed, woman had been bleeding. Twelve years old would have put her in sixth or seventh grade. She was not supposed to be sick, let alone at the point of death. Who of us wouldn’t do anything for a kid at that point? What we know was that she was sick, very sick, and loved, deeply loved.

Think of every 12-year-old, your kids or grandkids, all of those 12-year-olds at Jenks School and every school. The crowd is skeptical, even scornful, to Jesus’ face. They laugh at him when he downplays her illness. He goes in her room with just a handful of disciples and the little girl’s parents. He takes her by the hand – touch, remember – and tells her to get up. “Immediately” – there’s that word – immediately she gets up. She is healed.

Knowing I would read this story aloud in this space, I read it this week in our *memorial garden*. It is a lovely setting, a place where big issues of life and death converge. It is a place where we find Jesus, I believe, but where he also finds us. He is the through line in the story – with Jairus, with the unnamed woman, with the unnamed little girl.

We are not Jairus, until we are. We are not the twelve-year-old, until we are. We are not the unnamed woman, until we are. They all come to him. We come to him. We’re not sure what to do with all of this, in this 21st century, COVID saturated moment. But we come to him. And he comes to us.

Writing of the unnamed woman, Prathia Hall says “Jesus has the capacity to hear and to be touched by our suffering. It is this realization that spurs the woman to act courageously. Probably the woman and Jesus are the only two people in the whole crowd who do understand the courage of her touch. Her touch becomes a form of communication. Jesus responds, showing that he is not offended by her bleeding. He, too, would bleed as a social outcast.”

There are other things to note, random things, that all connect somehow.

- Jesus heals with his power, and though we are not quite sure what to do with that, we need to note that he shares his power and does not hoard it, and he shares it more powerfully with those who are most vulnerable.
- There is something about time here, and Jesus’ willingness to be interrupted, and Jesus’ time and our time. At the same time, there is an immediacy to all of this, that when Jesus is ready, we better be ready.
- Take note that the woman and the girl remain unnamed while the man is named. And also take note that for Jesus, names don’t matter, just as earthly power doesn’t matter. Except, except when he calls each of them “daughter.” That matters.
- Note how this all ends. He swears them to secrecy. That’s a gospel of Mark thing, in particular, like the use of the word “immediately.”

But after that, Jesus the powerful healer, Jesus the weak and vulnerable healer, tells them to give the girl something to eat. She must be hungry, Jesus rightly ascertains. Feed her. So read this story in your kitchen, at coffee hour, even at the communion table, where we meet Jesus and he meets us, in our weakness and vulnerability, in his weakness and vulnerably, and in his power, which is unlike any other power, thank God. Amen.