

Sunday, July 1, 2018
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 8 (Year B)

Mark 5.21-43

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

When it rains, it pours! At least sometimes it seems that way when you are engaged in ministry. Jesus goes across the Sea of Galilee on a pastoral mission to heal the Gerasene demoniac and no sooner does he return when he is hit with not one, but two, major pastoral emergencies. As we heard in today's Gospel, Jesus is confronted with two appeals for healing—one direct and one a little more surreptitious. Two stories of healing that are woven together into one—indicating that the two accounts, while very different, together paint a picture of a greater truth.

As soon as he steps off the boat, Jesus is met by Jairus, a synagogue official, beseeching him to heal his daughter who is gravely ill. More than willing to help, Jesus sets off toward Jairus' home. While en route, Jesus' attention is drawn to another in need. A woman suffering from a chronic illness. One who has exhausted all her options and has nowhere else to turn. One who has nothing to lose. Rather than fall down before Jesus as Jairus did, this woman merely reaches out and touches Jesus' cloak. Two people, very different, making the same plea for healing. Two people who out of desperation and seeing no other course of action available to them, turn to Jesus in absolute faith that he will be able to provide what they seek.

While Jairus and the Woman are very different in virtually every way, and while they approach Jesus in very different ways, it is the juxtaposition of these two—and the intersection of these two—that demonstrate who Jesus is for us.

Right off the bat, there is a glaring difference between Jairus and the Woman—other than one being male and one being female. Jairus is named. The Woman is not. The implication is that Jairus is a "somebody," worthy of having his name recorded for posterity. The Woman, on the other hand, is a "nobody," whose name is of no importance. (Of course, very few women in the Bible are actually named.)

Looking at these two characters, Jairus is obviously a "somebody." He is a leader of the local synagogue. He is a man with wealth, power, and prestige. He is a respected leader of the religious community and by extension, of the entire community.

On the other hand, the Woman is obviously a "nobody." Just being a woman, she has virtually no social standing. We are told she is poor, having spent all her money on numerous physicians, many of whom were probably peddling nothing more than snake oil. Since she had money at one point, probably from a deceased husband, she would have had some standing. But no more. That has been taken from her. As a result, she is now powerless. And then there is her illness. She has suffered from hemorrhaging for 12 years. Under Jewish law, a woman experiencing discharge of blood is considered religiously, ritually, unclean and anything she touches is likewise rendered ritually unclean. This extended and ongoing hemorrhaging would, therefore, leave her in a state of perpetual impurity, religiously speaking. She would, as a result,

be prohibited from worshiping in the temple or synagogue. Nor would anyone she had physical contact with be able to worship in the temple or synagogue without first undergoing the rite of purification. The Woman is, therefore, excluded from her religious community. The community that is represented by Jairus. The exclusion that would have been enforced by the likes of Jairus. And because of the threat to others of becoming ritually unclean, she would have been restricted in her access to conventional society. In addition, she was also most likely abandoned by her friends and even her family.

Both Jairus and the Woman come to Jesus in faith, believing in his power to heal and to bring new life. Both feel they are worthy of Jesus' care and compassion. As a result, both fall at Jesus' feet seeking healing—one for herself and one for his daughter. Both have absolute faith that Jesus can provide the healing that they so desperately desire and feel they deserve.

Both Jairus and the Woman take a risk in seeking out Jesus. Jairus, being a respected member of the religious and secular communities risks social capital and political clout. Not just because he sought out this unconventional healer, but because he dared to humble himself before Jesus by falling at his feet and begging. A position unbecoming of a person of his status. And the Woman risks even further ostracism—if that is even possible—by entering a crowd of people that would have bumped up against her, rendering them ritually unclean. She was surely inviting possible action from authorities if anyone happened to recognize who she was. But she knows that if she continues to follow the religious laws, she never will be healed.

Two people, one a “somebody,” one a “nobody,” having great faith in this Jesus to be able to provide what they both so desperately desired, willing to risk everything for the healing they not only wanted but felt they deserved. But the interaction between Jesus and the Woman carries additional weight by virtue of who she is, how she approaches him, and how he responds.

While Jairus was so determined to have healing for his daughter that he was willing to humble himself before Jesus, the Woman was acting out of sheer desperation. She knew she could not directly approach Jesus. Even speaking to him would have broken religious laws. So maybe, if she just touches a piece of his clothing, maybe his holiness would provide what she needed. Of course, even doing so technically would have rendered Jesus' clothes and his person ritually unclean. But if she did it without him seeing, nobody would be any the wiser. No harm no foul. She was at wits end and was willing to go to such surreptitious, such deceptive means to get the healing she needed. If it didn't work, she was certainly no worse off. And even in the act of doing this, whether it would work or not, the woman was doing something far more profound. In reaching for Jesus, she claims her humanity, dignity, and wholeness which has been so long denied. She claims a future for herself.

The Woman touching Jesus' cloak was certainly distinctive from the crowd pressing in on Jesus. No ordinary person would have been able to detect that. But he felt power draining from him, giving the healing the Woman desired. Jesus immediately stops and demands to know who touched him. It's not that he's angry. Far from it. He is well aware, from the discharge of energy, that one person in that crowd is in profound need. One who particularly needs his healing embrace. One who needs restoration, personally and communally. And he wants to

make sure she gets it. Despite the Woman's fear, she still speaks the truth about what happened, about what she did.

Jesus' response to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease," demonstrates the equality of grace and the egalitarianism of divine power. It did not matter that she was a "nobody." In calling the Woman "daughter," Jesus is recognizing her humanity, recognizing her rightful place as a beloved child of God, and of her deserving to be welcomed back into the family of God. Of course, she has always been part of God's family, even in her infirmity. Jesus is just affirming that fact.

In this whole encounter, Jesus allows himself to be interrupted by a "nobody" while on his way to help a "somebody," precisely because, regardless of who she is, she is in need. She is in need of something that only he can provide. In so doing, Jesus willingly crosses boundaries. He willingly interacts with the Woman who is ritually unclean. Despite the "threat" to himself of becoming ritually unclean. And he then continues on with Jairus to help his daughter, as well. The daughter that he has just been informed is now dead. In the home of Jairus, Jesus again crosses a boundary. He reaches out to touch Jairus' daughter and again faces the threat of rendering himself ritually unclean by touching a corpse. In both cases, societal categories and boundaries that seek to separate are of no concern to Jesus. He willingly reaches across those boundaries to welcome, to bring healing and wholeness, even to bring new life.

In addition to the physical healing, there is a relational aspect to the respective healings—of the Woman's and of Jairus' daughter—which is of great importance. Relational, communal, healing occurs. In the physical healing, the Woman is restored to her family and to her community. And the physical healing of Jairus' daughter restores her family to wholeness.

As we look at both healings in today's Gospel, it is apparent that who we are makes not one bit of difference, does not determine our worthiness to receive Christ's healing. It doesn't matter if we are a "somebody" or a "nobody." All are worthy in God's eyes. All are "somebodies" in God's eyes. And we are invited to go in faith to Jesus. We are invited to take that risk of presenting ourselves before him, just as we are. He is aware of our need and wants to help. We are invited to follow the example of the Woman, to reach out and claim as our own what Jesus willingly offers.

This week a woman told me that she found great comfort in the story of the Woman with the hemorrhage at a time when she was in need of healing. She said that what truly gives her comfort even now is knowing that this healing is not a one shot deal. That the cloak of Jesus is always available for us to reach out and touch, whenever we need his mercy, his healing, his love.

Today's Gospel is proof that Jesus is always there for us, ready to provide what we need. And that we need to have faith, to risk, and to take seriously the promise that Jesus will provide the healing we need. As the Rev. Dr. Lewis Galloway notes: "When we experience the abundance of God's grace, we can't help but take Jesus seriously. In Jesus, God has a way of transforming our dismissive laughter into tears of joy, our skepticism into speechless amazement. When this happens for us, as it did for a desperate, grieving father and a sick, ostracized woman, we know

what it is to be made whole. The gospel is full of promises that become our own when we take Jesus seriously” (*Synthesis*, Proper 8, July 1, 2018). When we risk reaching out in faith to touch our Lord, he, in return, reaches out to us. Calling us “daughter,” “son.” And lovingly giving us just what we need.