

Sunday, June 30, 2024
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8B)

Mark 5.21-43

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1494150367888410>

(Sermon begins at about 17:55)

“Being Seen”

The author of the Gospel according to Mark is rather fond of using a literary device technically known as an intercalation or interpolation. Although, this approach to telling biblical stories is more commonly and fondly referred to as the “Markan Sandwich.” So termed because Mark takes one story and sandwiches it within another story—one story being interrupted by another story and then returning to the original story. One story serving as the bread of the sandwich and one story serving as the meat or filling. There are several reasons for using this technique. First, it sends a message to the hearer that there is something important being conveyed, so pay attention. And second, there is something about the combining of the two separate stories that enhances the overall message in a way that would not be achieved through either story by itself.

While there are about half a dozen such instances of a “sandwich” in Mark’s Gospel, the one that is probably the most famous—and to my mind, the most obvious—is the Gospel reading we heard today: the story of Jairus’ daughter and the story of the woman with the hemorrhage. We start with the story of Jairus coming to Jesus seeking healing for his sick daughter. On his way to Jairus’ home, Jesus is interrupted and delayed by the woman with the hemorrhage, also seeking healing. And then after healing her, Jesus continues on to heal Jairus’ daughter. Compared to some of the other Markan sandwiches where the connections between the stories are a little more tangential and require some work to discern, this one has a seamless flow and carries common themes. In this case, both stories are about people seeking healing. While two separate stories, they are in many ways, one. Although more than the sum of its parts. Just as a sandwich is more than the sum of its component parts of bread and meat (or cheese or peanut butter).

Aside from the obvious themes of healing: one of a woman who has suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years and one of a twelve-year-old girl who is gravely ill, there are some other aspects of the story that are really only apparent when the stories are considered together. When considered side-by-side. Now there are a number of approaches that can be taken in comparing and analyzing the two stories, separately and together. There are a number of areas that could be the focus of such analysis. Although for our purposes today, one of the greatest lessons to be had is not in comparing the two who are healed: the woman and the daughter. For, in many ways, they are the same. Both are female, both are sick, and both are healed. No, there is an important lesson to be found in comparing the two parties who approach Jesus about healing: Jairus and the woman with the hemorrhage. So let’s compare Jairus and the woman and see what they tell us about the sandwich presented in today’s Gospel.

Among the most obvious comparisons between Jairus and the woman is gender. Jairus is a man and the woman is, well, a woman. Immediately, Jairus has an advantage in the cultural and religious context of the day. As a man, he can approach Jesus without any hesitation, without any consideration of social norms. The woman, on the other hand, does not have that luxury. As a woman, she was considered a second-class citizen. Given Jewish cultural and religious norms of the day, women typically interacted primarily with other women or with close male relatives. Interactions with unrelated men, especially in public settings, were generally limited and engaged in with caution to avoid any appearance of impropriety. This norm is ratcheted up in the case of the woman with the hemorrhage as Jesus is considered a holy teacher. Therefore, her approaching him would have been considered even more inappropriate and disrespectful of his status.

When it comes to status, there is another obvious difference between Jairus and the woman. He is the leader of the local synagogue, giving him great power. He probably also had a certain amount of wealth. The woman, on the other hand, is destitute. We are told that she had spent all she had on physicians, seeking relief from her ailment. Implying that she may have once been a woman of wealth and status. But who she might have been does not matter. Now she is destitute. Placing her and Jairus at opposite ends of the social spectrum. The difference between them further magnified by the fact that we know Jairus' name, but not hers.

Another critical comparison between Jairus and the woman was their religious status. We know that Jairus was a leader of the synagogue. Meaning that he would have been known as being a devout Jew and followed all the appropriate religious laws. As such, he would have been the model of ritual purity. The woman, on the other hand, by virtue of her illness, would have been considered ritually unclean. Under Jewish law, those who were sick were considered ritually unclean and were not permitted to enter the synagogue until going through rites of purification. Nor were they allowed to be in close proximity to other people, for merely touching someone who was sick would render a person ritually unclean. Combine all that with the fact that the woman's ailment was a hemorrhage, implying irregular menstrual discharge, and you have a double whammy. Anything involving the discharge of blood, including a woman's period, automatically rendered her ritually unclean.

This latter fact really put the woman in a bad spot. Literally. Because of her ritual impurity, she should not have been anywhere near other people. Especially not in a crowd of people. A crowd that, as noted in the Gospel account, was so great that it was "pressing in on" Jesus. The woman knew that she was breaking all sorts of social and religious taboos by being in that crowd, by seeking to interact with Jesus. But she is so desperate that she is willing to disregard those taboos. Hence her action of surreptitiously creeping up behind Jesus and touching his cloak.

Because of who she is, a woman, and her current situation, being sick and ritually unclean, she knows she is not able to directly interact with Jesus. So she does what she can, albeit stealthily, covertly, to try to obtain the healing she believes Jesus can provide her. Completely opposite to Jairus' approach in seeking healing for his daughter. Because of being a man, and his status as a religious leader, he is able to directly come to Jesus and ask for assistance.

This is an interesting comparison between the approaches these two take in seeking Jesus' help. Jairus can, because of his status, freely approach Jesus directly. Which he does. But as we are told, he does so with great humility. He falls at Jesus' feet and repeatedly begs him to heal his daughter. The woman, on the other hand, because of her status, is not able to approach Jesus directly. Instead, she is forced, out of necessity, to do so boldly, albeit covertly, without him initially knowing what had happened. At least, not until he felt power leave him. At which point, he stops and tries to determine who touched him.

The interesting thing is the woman could have probably slipped away without anyone knowing what happened. Immediately after she touched Jesus' cloak, "her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease." At that point, she could have slipped away unnoticed and moved on with her life, healed and renewed. And yet, to her credit, she chose to take responsibility for her actions. "The woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell before him and told him the whole truth."

In that moment, as she knelt before Jesus, she was, at least in Jesus' eyes, equal to Jairus: the one who was opposite to her in every way. Jairus having knelt before Jesus humbly seeking healing for his daughter. The woman now kneeling before Jesus humbly seeking his forgiveness for breaking various social and religious taboos and rendering him ritually unclean in the process. And yet, he was not upset. He was not angry. He was not filled with any concern for his own status. In that moment he was only filled with love and compassion for the woman. "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

In that moment, for the first time in twelve years, the woman was healthy and whole. She was ritually clean. She was no longer ostracized by society. She was once again part of the community, both religious and secular. Her past, at least the last twelve years of it, had been swept away. She had her life back. She had a future. In that moment, she was seen for who she is: a beloved child of God.

This is the real lesson of today's Gospel—well, one of them. That despite who she was, despite all that was stacked against her by her religion and her society, despite being ostracized, despite being invisible, a nameless woman in a great crowd who was suffering in silence, Jesus felt her presence. Jesus saw her for who she was. Jesus saw her need. Jesus saw her for who she could be. And just as she had boldly reached out to touch his cloak, he boldly granted her what she desired and needed. He boldly reaches out to her in love and compassion, with no regard for what others might have thought, and with every regard for who she truly was and is. He has no regard for the power that has gone out of him, but every regard for the power of her faith. A faith that, in that moment, far outshines that of Jairus, the religious leader, who is witnessing faith in action. In that moment, she becomes the teacher, to Jairus and to us, of the meaning and the power of true faith.

No matter what we might be going through now or in the future, no matter that we might feel but a nameless body in a crowd of so much need, we can be assured by the nameless woman with the now-healed hemorrhage that Jesus sees us. When we dare to reach out to him in faith, we can be assured that he dares to reach back in love and compassion: "Child, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed."