

Feb. 27, 2011
Mark 5:21-43
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Healing Touch

SCRIPTURE READING:

Bible study is both exciting and frustrating and thus best done with others. Before we turn to today's reading I want to take a moment to invite you to consider the Lenten Bible Study and book discussion groups that I will be doing beginning a week from Monday. There is both an evening group and a daytime group so you can pick which is most convenient for you. We will be studying Mark, chapters 11-16, the stories of Holy Week - from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday. To facilitate our discussion we will be using the book, *The Last Week: What the Gospels really say about Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*, by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. There is more information in the bulletin. I hope you will be able to join us.

In the book we will be reading we will learn about a literary practice of the writer of the gospel of Mark, which we find in today's reading. Today's reading is like an Oreo cookie. As you will hear, the outsides - the beginning and the end are one story and they sandwich the inside, which is a different story. In this case the outsides of the reading are about a twelve-year-old girl, Jairus' daughter. The middle story is about a woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years, as long as the young girl has been alive. The way the first story is interrupted we might be tempted to think that the writer of Mark is just easily distracted and got sidetracked, but this Oreo structure is a common practice in Mark and means he wants us to consider the stories together.

They are meant to inform and interpret each other. To begin with, the stories are about two women at significant stages of women's lives. Although the middle story doesn't explicitly say so the implication is that the bleeding the woman is experiencing refers to her womb. So, on the one hand, we have a young girl entering puberty who is just beginning the experience of a woman's bleeding, and on the other hand is likely a perimenopausal woman who can't stop bleeding.

The girl and the woman in the reading are not given personal names. However the first person we are introduced to, the girl's father is. His name is Jairus. It's not just an ordinary name. Given names in the Bible often are meant to convey something more than just a name. The name Jairus means "awaken or enlighten." In other words the storyteller is saying to us, "Listen up."

Jairus is a leader of the synagogue. He is a person of faith, who in good gospel fashion is about to have his faith turned upside down and inside out. It is important for us to know that in Jairus' times the religious concerns were not so much about personal sin as about proper worship. A number of the things that made you ritually impure to participate in public worship are found in this story - menstrual bleeding or contact with someone in this situation, and contact with a corpse. You had to be kept separate until you had gone through a weeklong process of ritual cleansing after

these experiences before you could go to worship. This leader of the synagogue is going to be challenged in these beliefs. Let's hear these stories again.

SERMON:

To be human is to be in need of healing. Like the hemorrhaging woman, we are all bleeding, in one way or another. Like Jairus' daughter, we are all in the process of dying, sooner or later. Like Jairus, our religious sensibilities are challenged.

While we are still alive, we seek healing in all kinds of ways, from:

- acupuncture to Advil
- CAT scans to chiropractic care
- massage to meditation
- prayer to Paxil
- psychotherapy to physical therapy
- z's of sleep to Zolof

And that's just to name a few.

To be human is to need healing, sometimes more than others. It's been said that the two most basic prayers, are "thank you" and "help me." In both stories today the cry is "help me." Or in one case "help my child."

There is nothing more wrenching than a parent's anguish over a deathly ill child or a child who has died. I first met Joel and Chrystal soon after the death of their first child by SIDS - sudden infant death syndrome. They were living in a daze.

As Yeats put it: *Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.* These parents would have gladly fallen on their knees before Jesus and cried "help our child" for the rest of their lives if their child could have lived. I recognize that many of you here today know this anguish personally, as well. One of the hard things about hearing healing stories from the Bible is our struggle with the existential question of why some people are healed and others are not. We do not know.

Although, we know sometimes the answer has to do with human decisions such as the distribution of medical resources in our world. For the world's poorest people medical care boils down to the most basic of life's needs - clean water, proper sewerage treatment and enough food to eat - and there are many people in the world who don't have those things.

Even where there is medical care, there are significant challenges – sometimes by natural disasters and sometimes by human conflicts. The medical and rescue teams in Christchurch, New Zealand are overwhelmed by the earthquake there. Specialty teams, including one from Los Angeles, have gone to help. The medical community in Tripoli, Libya is overwhelmed by casualties created by the fighting between protestors and Qaddafi supporters, including reportedly assaults happening in hospitals themselves. We pray that things do not get worse.

In our own country we are facing critical financial discussions and disagreements about who pays for the health care we have available. In addition, with ever increasing technological advances, we also face increasing ethical questions about when to use such technologies and when to allow people to die naturally.

Those among us who are presently experiencing significant medical challenges, or those who are caregivers of people in such situations, know the emotional exhaustion, the social isolation, the family turmoil, and the financial challenges that often come in such times. Over 50% of the personal bankruptcies in the US involve some medical expenses that can't be met and many of those people have health insurance.

All these challenges feel heavy. Life can be heavy and the prospects bleak, which is the feeling of the two families in today's reading. The hemorrhaging woman had accessed all the medical care she could afford. "She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had." Her money was gone and she was still bleeding. This bleeding was not only a financial, physical and emotional drain; it also isolated her from her religious community. As I mentioned earlier such bleeding made her ritually impure and prevented her from participating in worship. She was prevented from accessing a resource that is essential for the deepest healing, the support of others who together are attentive to the presence of God.

Yet, she had heard of this healer, this messenger from God, who was traveling through the land, upsetting the religious authorities and healing in unorthodox ways. She couldn't stay away. However, it was too risky to ask him for help directly for people would recognize her. And if he touched her he would become unclean as well. Don't you suspect that she thought maybe she could just touch his cloak in the crowd and go unnoticed. It turns out that even such a simple touch engaged in with an open and hopeful heart changes things and does not go unnoticed. She is healed. "Thank you."

Now Jairus, the one character along with Jesus who ties the stories together has an ethical and spiritual dilemma. Jesus is now ritually unclean, which doesn't seem like a big deal to us but would have been to Jairus. Everything he has stood for, as a leader of the synagogue would say it is inappropriate for Jesus to touch Jairus' daughter. However, when your child is dying and now apparently dead, all bets are off, all preconceived notions are up for grabs. Your heart is so bleeding you can be open to new possibilities. So,

Jairus chooses hope and takes Jesus to his house. With a healing touch the girl is restored to life. "Thank you."

There are three characters besides Jesus in this story. Two of them are physically healed. It is a mystery. There was something about Jesus' charisma, his gifts. Healing power was strong within him and attuned to those around him. Yet, his capacity and calling for healing was not confined to the physical. His healing touch was ultimately about spiritual wholeness.

So what about the third character in this reading? What about Jairus? Maybe in putting these two stories together with Jairus being the common thread the writer of Mark is drawing us to wonder what happens to Jairus in the process of these encounters? Maybe Mark is really speaking to the Jairus in us. Jairus is us. Jairus is the religious community. Jairus knows his religion inside out. He is a pillar of the church. He knows the purity codes. He knows which hymns should be sung, and how people should dress and behave. He knows "we've always done it this way." Then, when life threw Jairus overboard, Jesus threw him a lifejacket that violated his religious sensibilities. Jairus chooses to put that lifejacket on.

Remember that the name Jairus means, "awaken." The implicit question Mark leaves us with at the end of the reading is - Will Jairus remain open to the mysterious ways of God's Spirit even as it upsets his religious customs and practices? The question is posed for us as well. Will we be open to God's healing touch in our lives and in the life of the church no matter how surprising and unexpected it may be?