

Reading For Sunday July 1st 2018

Text: Mark 5:21-43

²¹ When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. ²² Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. ²³ He pleaded earnestly with him, “My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.” ²⁴ So Jesus went with him. A large crowd followed and pressed around him. ²⁵ And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. ²⁶ She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. ²⁷ When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸ because she thought, “If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.” ²⁹ Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. ³⁰ At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my clothes?” ³¹ “You see the people crowding against you,” his disciples answered, “and yet you can ask, ‘Who touched me?’ ” ³² But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. ³³ Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. ³⁴ He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.” ³⁵ While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. “Your daughter is dead,” they said. “Why bother the teacher anymore?” ³⁶ Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, “Don’t be afraid; just believe.” ³⁷ He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. ³⁸ When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. ³⁹ He went in and said to them, “Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.” ⁴⁰ But they laughed at him. After he put them all out, he took the child’s father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. ⁴¹ He took her by the hand and said to her, “*Talitha koum!*” (which means “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”). ⁴² Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. ⁴³ He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

“Don’t Be Afraid, Only Believe.”

In the biblical world, sickness was the leading edge of death and to be healed was to be restored to life. In today’s reading, we have two life-and-death situations and Mark, characteristically, places one story inside the other.¹ Sandwiching the two incidents is meant to permeate and enhance both, and each, in their own way, represents a tragedy. Both stories are about *fear* and *faith*, and the power of

¹This is commonly referred to as a “Markan sandwich”; see: <http://markgospel.blogspot.com/2007/02/markan-sandwiches.html>.

Jesus to take people from one to the other.² In one sense, these are everyday occurrences; the events relate life with death, and how sickness has *no* respect for one's age. As we explore these healings today, let us consider afresh the words and actions of Jesus and allow them to impact on *our* everyday lives and prayers. Mark uses these episodes to reveal the practical nature of the Kingdom of God and the authority of Jesus as king of both Life and the Mosaic Law.

The first story has all the elements of tragedy, as the grave illness or death of a young child always does. Her father, Jairus, was the leader of the synagogue, possibly from Capernaum. It is reasonable to assume he was influential and relatively wealthy, and his role was to maintain the order and smooth running of the synagogue. We might say he was the Clerk of Session, not the minister! He knew the mixed reputation Jesus had as a controversial rabbi, yet one who through whom God's power was undoubtedly at work. Whatever reservations or prejudices Jairus had, he threw them all aside because he was *desperate*.³ Mark tells us that he submissively fell at the feet of Jesus, out of respect, and begged him repeatedly, saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live."⁴ He forgets any pride or dignity,⁵ or concerns over the consequences, and will do anything to save his dying daughter—what loving father wouldn't? Jesus agrees to the request and is accompanied by a large crowd.

The story now pivots to a nameless, impoverished, and powerless woman, someone whose medical condition would automatically *exclude* her from the synagogue. This too is a tragedy; her longstanding *gynecological* problem⁶ meant she could not get married, or—if already married—was legitimate grounds for divorce. Like someone with leprosy in those days, she was experiencing a living death. She *also* knew of Jesus' reputation as a healer and comes to him as a last resort, having spent all her money suffering every other so-called "cure" the world had to offer. So many people seek help from God only when they have reached their wits end. The woman knows she is unclean and believes that touching Jesus will heal her, but also likely knows this touch will render *him* unclean. (Incidentally, in that culture, touching the person's cloak was equivalent to touching the person.) The belief that touching a person who has holy powers could heal was widespread in antiquity. This is a *magical* view of healing. The woman's faith was real, but expressed in an inadequate theology. Mark considers practical faith more important than conceptually accurate theology.⁷ Her faith was not about believing the right things concerning Jesus, but in his power to help—this should be a source of hope and encouragement for everyone who prays. Not only does her faith cause her to violate conventional social constraints by appearing in public and—especially—by touching a revered holy man, but Jesus also transgresses customary norms by stopping, touching, and talking with the woman.⁸

² And we also saw that in last week's sermon/reading with Jesus calming the storm (Mark 4:35-41).

³ Mark attributes the hostility towards Jesus to the scribes and Pharisees, *not* to the local synagogue leaders.

⁴ Mark 5:22b-23.

⁵ The twin issues of "desperation" and "dignity" echo the story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5.

⁶ While Mark is not explicit, the language echoes that of Lev 12:7; 15:25 and would be understood as such by his readers.

⁷ See Mark 9:38 – 41.

⁸ See also John 4:27.

We are told, “Immediately her bleeding stopped and she *felt in her body* that she was freed from her suffering.”⁹ In the conversation that follows between Jesus and the women, Mark makes it clear that Jesus is *not* a magician; while the woman believed in the power of a holy man’s touch, Jesus tells her that it is *her faith* that has healed her. Nevertheless, faith, in itself, is powerless, but it *is* the vehicle through which the power of Jesus can work.¹⁰ Mark emphasizes that Jesus *himself* is the source of power; he has his *own* authority and is not merely a conduit to God. The woman does not say to herself, “if I have *enough* faith then I will be healed” but simply believes in *Jesus’* power to heal. One further important outcome is that Jesus reverses her social exclusion and calls her “daughter”!

The story now switches back to that of Jairus. News comes that his daughter has died. They say, “It’s too late; don’t bother Jesus anymore.”¹¹ The mountain that Jairus had been climbing suddenly became taller than Everest! Jesus simply says, “Don’t be afraid, only believe.” How do you imagine Jairus responded to that?! How would *we* respond? It is clearly an impossible situation, but you go on, following Jesus, one step at a time. When they arrive at Jairus’ house, the funeral had already begun.¹² Jesus enters the home and says to them, “Why all this commotion and wailing?” (There is nothing worse than going to funeral, or some other crisis, and sense that people are without any hope.) Jesus then says, “The child is not dead but asleep.”¹³ There is clever wordplay here as death was commonly referred to as “sleeping” in the Bible.¹⁴ Perhaps “death” is called “sleep” here, not to pretend the situation is not really happening, but to deny that death is final! Jesus dismisses the professional mourners, who merely laugh at him. And so Jesus, the girl’s parents and Peter, James, and John go to the child’s room. Jesus does not perform any complex ritual; he simply took the dead girl’s hand and said to her, “Little girl, it’s time to get up!”¹⁵ And she did, and then he tells them to give her something to eat. Everyone is *astonished*! In both healings, Jesus *defies* any implied ritual defilement when touching either the unclean woman or the corpse. Jesus thereby demonstrates he is Lord of both Life and the Mosaic Law.¹⁶

Stories like our gospel readings today, taken at face value, seem to promise *too* much. They give the impression that everyone with faith in Jesus is meant to make a complete recovery from whatever major surgery or life-threatening illness they are facing. Yet we know of children who have died and those who are chronically sick.¹⁷ Life events don’t always have such happy endings. Consequently, this passage leaves us with all sorts of questions, such as: If the gospel accounts are to be believed, *why* did Jesus raise a few people back to life?¹⁸ Why not *more*? What about others who were sick in the

⁹ Mark 5:29.

¹⁰ See Mark 6:5.

¹¹ Mark 5:35.

¹² Burial on the same day would be standard practice in a hot climate. Moreover, this is a sure sign that the girl was definitely dead and not merely unconscious!

¹³ Mark 5:39.

¹⁴ See 1 Cor 15:6,20; 1Thes 4:13-18; John 11:11-14; Acts 7:60 and numerous references in the psalms and prophets.

¹⁵ Mark 5:41.

¹⁶ This follows on from the earlier incident in Mark 2:23-3:6 when Jesus claims to be “Lord of the Sabbath.”

¹⁷ As one person put it, “After a certain age are never really well, just less sick!”

¹⁸ See John 11 for the account of Lazarus.

crowd, who, presumably, were not healed?¹⁹ Many people object to these stories *not* on the ground that they are incredible, but that they are *unfair*. If God did this once or twice, why not everyone? I don't think this is the right way to approach this complex issue. After all, if God healed everybody then this world would be unrecognizable to us—and our prayers really *would* be like magic spells!²⁰

While that may be what we instinctively think a loving, all-powerful God *should* do, that is obviously *not* the way God works in the world. Just because God heals an individual doesn't mean that God *must* therefore heal everybody. We think that way because our usual starting assumption is that God *could* have done so, because God is absolutely omnipotent. I think this poor theology gets us into serious trouble when considering the age-old problem of suffering. We end up blaming God because we believe God *could* have healed but, for some reason, didn't *want* to! God, however, is *not* a micromanager; he has endowed creation with a significant degree of autonomy thus revealing he is a *power-sharing* deity. What we need is a broader theology of miracles, one that begins with scripture, naturally, but also includes the use of reason, our experience and context, and the broader, historical Christian tradition. I think it's best to view the occurrence of miracles as *glimpses of the future in the present*. That is what Jesus' miracles were revealing in his now-and-not-yet kingdom of God. They are profound *signs of grace* which vividly illuminate God's ultimate purposes for all of creation.

So when the miracle we ask for doesn't happen, let's not blame or doubt God, or, for that matter, accuse someone of lacking faith. In every medical situation we have at least three other factors: a very complex world, a specific disease, and an individualized body chemistry. We know from experience *complete* healing is extremely rare, but there *may* be some *partial* healing or *protection* within a person's physical body. We will never know for sure, and such things can only be interpreted through the eyes of faith. For instance, my first wife's bone cancer in her neck remained stable for five years. She had full mobility, yet given the seriousness of the situation, being confined to a wheelchair had been a real possible outcome. Anne also responded to other treatments: her liver cancer decreased and remained under control throughout her life. I thank God for that.²¹ All healing comes from God and we should make full use of medical expertise that is open to us. Each person is different; each medical scenario is different, the physical and spiritual circumstances are unique. What seems to have not been possible in Anne's case may still be possible in another situation, and therefore we confidently ask God to do all that is possible for others in their unique sets of circumstances. In short, it is *always* right and appropriate to come to Jesus and to humbly ask for healing. [That is why after the service next week we will have another opportunity for prayers for healing.] However, Bishop James Jones reminds us that, "All the healings of Jesus were only temporary remissions. The people he healed and raised from the dead didn't live forever—they later

¹⁹ Even in John's account of Jesus' healing at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1–15), only one man was healed when there were clearly many in need.

²⁰ Our most faith-filled prayers do not often result in what we desire. However, this far too crude a criterion for assessing the effectiveness of prayer; it makes prayer more like magic. Moreover, a miracle is *not* an automatic reward for good behavior or fervent faith! Neither does God weigh a person's faith to see if it is enough before granting the miracle!

²¹ I also believe that Anne lived at least a year longer than expected—and with a good quality of life. I believe this was an answer to prayer and corresponds to "partial" healing or "protection" within her body.

died. This wasn't a failure on the part of Jesus. In healing people he wasn't saying that no one should ever fall ill and die."²²

Questions concerning miracles, though important for us, miss the point of the larger story that Mark is telling. Jesus wasn't coming to be a one-man emergency medical center. And he wasn't coming as a one-man liberation movement in a traditional political sense. He *was* starting a revolution, and he was indeed bringing God's healing power, but his aim went much deeper. One of the Greek words commonly translated as "miracle" means, literally, "sign." Hence the important next question, "*A sign of what?*" They are *signs* of the real revolution, the real healing, that God was to accomplish through his death and resurrection of Jesus. Signposts are important, but they are *not* the destination. We need to see the overall Jesus movement in all its rich dimensions and we need to understand that behind each of these intense and intimate human dramas there lays a darker reality behind it. Jesus is on his way to confront evil at its very heart. In the end, he will defeat not just sickness and disease, but death itself—and this good news is as unexpected as these two dramatic healings.

The complete Jesus-story not only reveals the heart of God, but that the Trinity is actively working to bring the world to right. While that will only be complete when Christ returns, we may witness "glimpses of the future in the present." Some of those miracles will involve the natural order—healings; others will result in transformed lives and situations. However, it is evident that despite our faith and prayers not everything we ask for is always possible. Most situations do *not* end with dramatic healings. I suggest this is not for lack of faith in Jesus, nor because God does not *want* to heal. This is blaming the victim and doubting the character of God revealed in Jesus the Messiah. Evidently, God's relationship with creation is more complicated than we imagine.²³ [I have written a book exploring this issue!] We can't *solve* the mystery of suffering, but because of the resurrection, we *can* live within a *faith-filled framework of hope*. It is powerfully reassuring that even though we live in a world of pain and suffering, God is fundamentally opposed to evil and all its effects. The Trinity's definitive response to evil at the cross demonstrates a shouldering of the responsibility for creating this type of world where evil is possible. And it also speaks of Emmanuel—"God *with us*" on *our* journey, just as Jesus was present with Jairus and the unnamed woman on their journeys of faith.

Sometimes, our journeys seem equally desperate and impossible. So what are we to do? We are to follow Jesus, one step at a time. As post-Pentecost Christians we have confident grounds to *expect* God to be with us. Of course it's always right to pray for miracles, but, more importantly, we must pray for a profound awareness of God's powerful Spirit being *within and around us* as we experience our sufferings. Jesus the healer also knows the path of suffering, and he also knows that death is not the last word. So hold tight to those words of Jesus: "Go in peace; don't be afraid, only believe." Knowing Jesus is alongside us in a crisis makes *all* the difference in the world, whatever transpires! Amen.

²² Jones, *Why Do People Suffer*, 90–91.

²³ This is, after all, what theodicy and theologies of divine action explore. See also Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* (Cascade, 2018).