

“The Center of Jesus’ Ministry: a Tale of Two Daughters”

11 June 2023

Scripture: Mark 5: 21-42

21 When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. 22 Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet 23 and begged him repeatedly, "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." 24 So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him.

25 Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. 26 She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. 27 She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, 28 for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." 29 Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. 30 Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" 31 And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?" "

32 He looked all around to see who had done it. 33 But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. 34 He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

35 While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" 36 But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." 37 He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. 38 When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. 39 When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping."

40 And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. 41 He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" 42 And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement.

Sermon — “The Center of Jesus’ Ministry: a Tale of Two Daughters.”

Jairus was a man of significance in that society, a “big deal,” I guess you could say. First of all, he was a man in a very patriarchal culture and as a religious leader in his local the synagogue he would have been educated and a man of some economic means. He may have also been the head of his extended family thus having responsibility for caring for his mother, his wife and kids as well as the spouses and children of his siblings.

Jairus was also unique in Mark’s Gospel since he was one of the few persons who actually gets named. In that culture Jairus would have had the right to publicly greet and to make requests of any other male face to face. But the urgency of his situation caused him to actually come groveling at Jesus’ feet “begging and pleading repeatedly” for Jesus’ help. The fact that one of the most powerful men in town was reduced to begging Jesus repeatedly until he finally relented to go with him, I think is important.

But as the two press through the crowd on the way to Jairus’ home both the entourage and story, was brought to a sudden halt, due to the remarkable actions of an “unnamed” woman. A woman who was the exact opposite of Jairus in so many ways.

First, and most obvious, she was a woman in a very patriarchal society. But even this lower status was further compromised by the fact that she was likely elderly, poor and seemingly alone. She had been left penniless, we are told, due to the unscrupulous and ineffective healthcare system of her society.

Taking action on her own behalf would also suggest that she didn’t have anyone else, at least a male family member to advocate for her, or even any extended family to help care for her.

Her affliction was possibly a constant bleeding or uncontrolled menstrual discharge known as menometrorrhagia, which would have left her in a constant state of religious impurity and a social outcast. Levitical law was clear that she must be exiled from any other religiously observant Jew - an untouchable.

The fact that she was anywhere near people, especially religious leaders, was in itself a bit preposterous, since her very presence in a crowded public place would have potentially negated the ritual purity of anyone who might come in contact with her. But she was there, risking even greater shame, similar to Jairus, due to her desperate circumstances. But unlike Jarius, she neither begged nor pleaded for Jesus’ help, but reached out secretly to touch the only part of Jesus that she could possibly get her hands on.

In the chaos, no one appeared to notice what had happened except Jesus, who immediately stopped to ask, “Who touched me?” Quite a preposterous question according to his own disciples considering that nearly everyone in that crowd of pushing and shoving humanity was actually trying to touch him. But according to the passage, “Jesus kept looking” heightening the

tensions while wasting valuable time as a child was dyeing. But this encounter exposes a critical lesson about who was at the exact center of Jesus' ministry.

Knowing that the jig was up the woman steps forward not only into the center of the crowd but also into the center of the story! No longer hidden by the crowd she approached Jesus and like Jairus, fell Jesus' at his feet! Silenced and alone for so long, she suddenly finds her voice, and begins to tell "the whole truth," according to Mark.

Jesus then publicly acknowledged her faith, something by the way he did not point out when he first met Jairus. Faith was also a critical element that he noted was lacking in his very own disciples only a few verses earlier. But even more importantly Jesus called this unnamed and previously anonymous woman, his "daughter!" This is a term of endearment, of a close and precious relationship.

She is now no longer simply a part of an undifferentiated "crowd" or even a poor, ritually impure outcast. It was, rather, a clear signal that Jesus had not only restored this woman to physical health but that Jesus was now restoring her as a part of the larger community. She was no longer alone but part of a family now and thus a valued member of society.

For you see, the Law that God had given to ensure the equality of all had sadly become corrupted by the religious elite and they had internally exiled her from her community. Jesus was also challenging those who abused their ritual power.

First, he shows that God's power acts actually in reverse of the commonly understood process of contamination. According to common understanding, Jesus would have become ritually unclean when this woman touched him. But instead, when she touched Jesus, she was healed or made whole as the pathway of contagion was reversed.

We cannot be made ritually impure by that which exists outside us. Instead, our purity lies within our heart and the actions that result. True religion, Jesus was showing us, not only seeks out, but then actually embraces, the poor and the hurting. It creates restorative and healing relationships.

But what about Jairus and his daughter? After all, Jesus did promise to help him first. Well, before Jesus can finish his conversation with his new daughter, the horrible news arrives that Jairus' daughter has died. It would appear that Jesus failed at his initial mission.

And when Jesus learns about her death, he was first confronted with indifference, "why bother the teacher anymore?" Perhaps his dilly - dallying with the outcast may have actually contributed to her death?

Instead, Jesus forged ahead, undeterred even by those who begin to sneer and laugh at him, to help what he considered, "a sleeping child. But if we are to once again follow the common wisdom of the day, Jesus is now contaminated and a potential contagion for others. He should

not be going around touching other folks or trying to heal anybody until he first goes to the Temple and restores his own purity by offering the appropriate sacrifices to the priests. No doubt Jairus and everyone else in the crowd is aghast by this. But a story about the healing of a sick daughter now becomes a story about resurrection and new life.

And there are some very powerful symbolic connections between these two daughters that I must highlight. Jairus' daughter we are told was 12 years old while and the unnamed woman had suffered for 12 years. Coincidence? I don't think so.

The number 12 in Biblical literature is symbolically significant. God's message was first given to the 12 tribes of Israel and Jesus selected 12 disciples to help spread his "good news."

By "sandwiching" these two events, Mark is also clearly stating that Jesus was also pronouncing a severe judgement on religious status quo. For you see, the original purpose of God's Law was to actually protect and care for the most vulnerable in society. But by the time Jesus had arrived on the scene, the socio-religious system seemed more interested in keeping the religious faithful pure by not actually coming into contact with the vulnerable. And according to Jesus, this religious system was more than just a little corrupt or even sick, it was now down right dead. Yep, deader than a doornail!

Mark seems to have gone to great lengths to create two very contrasting characters. Mark has also used religiously symbolic language and numbers. He even interrupted a story about the healing of one daughter of privilege to risk ritual contamination and heal an untouchable "daughter." And now, to touch a dead body would also have made Jesus unclean or ritually impure. But once again, he risked this in order to raise that little girl from her dead sleep. Certainly, to claim that the cultural-religious status quo is dead would have indeed been astounding.

But that claim is taken to a whole new level, by Jesus' claim that he can also raise those oppressive structures from the dead! I would think that we can also safely assume that Jesus would call for more of the same even in our day. We are not in need of more holy buildings, or priests, or rules.

No, the way of the true purity of religion and even the resurrection that Jesus is calling for, is through a new kind of family relationships! It is a new and radical way of relating to others where one cares for the poor and values each and every person.

It's a way, he too was willing to risk living himself. It is a community where purity is not to be measured by how well we follow rules and by what or whom we avoid. Instead, purity in the Jesus community, is based upon how we treat the outcast and our hunger for justice and the depth of our love for one another.

But each and every generation, of those who are trying to follow Jesus will be interrupted by the pressing needs of the poor and the outcasts. In our current culture many times, we too are

met with indifference that tries to convince us that this kind of community isn't worth believing in and it certainly isn't worth all the effort!

But following Jesus also leads us into becoming part of a community that stands in contrast to a culture that is simultaneously both asleep and captivated by death and indifference. It is also a community that is made up of folks who are awake and alive - a new family, not of blood relationships, but of caring folks so full of life that are finding new moms and dads, sisters and brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles! A whole new and loving family.

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