

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 1, 2018
Pentecost 6
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 15:7-15
Psalm 112
2 Corinthians 8:1-15
Mark 5:22-43

I begin today with a rather odd question: How many of you enjoy a good sandwich?

I do. And evidently Mark does too, because in writing his Gospel he sometimes begins a story, and midway through the story he inserts another story, and then returns to finish the original story. He “sandwiches” one story inside of another.

Many feel that our Gospel lesson today is perhaps Mark’s best “sandwich.” He ties two stories of sick women together in such a masterful way that the one story cannot fully be understood apart from the other. Your worship folders today contain only the first story, but I will also refer to the other story (the story of the woman healed of a twelve year long blood disorder) in the sermon.

After crossing the Sea of Galilee last week and moving with his disciples into Gentile territory, Jesus and his disciples are now back in Jewish territory. Immediately as he gets out of the boat, a synagogue ruler named Jairus is there to

meet him. He falls down at Jesus' feet and begs Jesus to heal his daughter, who is about to die.

Then, without warning, Mark interrupts this incident to show us this bleeding woman. She is described as "desperate," bleeding for twelve years, reduced to poverty by (possibly unscrupulous) doctors, and getting worse, not better.

Her disease means exclusion. She likely doesn't have much company or compassion, given the source and location of her bleeding. But her problem is not just a messy matter of hygiene. She is also ritually unclean, which in the first century meant isolation and separation from the rest of the community.

It's hard for us to appreciate fully her actions. We can envision her emerging from the darkness of some dwelling, stepping into the light and oozing blood, fighting her way through the large crowd and rendering everyone she bumps into unclean in the process. *This is the picture of faith in Mark's Gospel: persistence in seeking Jesus in spite of impossible odds.*

And her faith is rewarded. She simply touches Jesus' garments, and she is healed. Here the story gets a bit tricky. An honest reading of it suggests that Jesus does not know who has touched him. He says: "Who touched my garments?"

This suggests that the healing power flows from Jesus *without his direct willing of it*. The disciples think that the question is absurd, given the large crowd,

but Jesus won't let it drop. He insists on a personal encounter. It's not enough to settle for Jesus' power. His works cannot be separated from his identity.

The healed woman comes forth, fearful. She confesses the whole truth. She speaks forth her pain, and her belief that if she only could touch the hem of his garment, she would be made well.

Here we see a repeated theme in Mark: In Mark's Gospel, faith need not be perfect. It can be mixed with fear and doubt. (Remember in 9:24, where the sick man says to Jesus: "I believe, help thou my unbelief!")

Jesus' response here is tender in its mercy. He says: "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

Here things get a bit tricky. Because while Jesus is saying to the woman, "Daughter, be healed of your disease," there are messengers from Jairus' house who arrive and say, "Your daughter is dead. Don't trouble the teacher any further."

In the way Mark tells it, the healing of the woman with the blood disorder has cost Jairus' daughter her life! A desperate woman, bleeding for twelve years and destitute from doctor bills, is miraculously healed. But Jairus' little girl has died in the meantime!

As we read Mark's account of this, we see and feel the irony. And we are tempted to ask: Ok, so Jesus healed this bleeding woman without even trying— but what about this little girl?

As Jairus is beginning to surrender to grief and despair, Jesus says to him: “Don't be afraid – only believe.” Then he grabs Peter, James, and John, and they all arrive at Jairus' house, where the grief is already palpable among those who are there.

Jesus uses the metaphor of sleep to describe death, which was common at the time. It's an apt metaphor, because just as we surrender to sleep every night but rise again every morning, for the Christian death is not the final end.

But the mourners at Jairus' house think Jesus is making a fool of himself when he says, “the girl is not dead, merely sleeping.” They laugh at him derisively. (In their defense, if you and I were at a child's funeral today and someone said this, how would we respond?)

Jesus finds their lack of faith disturbing, and so he shuts everyone out except for the girl's parents and Peter, James, and John. As he did with Peter's mother-in-law, who was as “good as dead” with a fever (1:31), and the dead demon possessed boy who was “like a corpse” (9:26-27), Jesus reaches to the little girl and says, “Little girl, get up.”

Immediately she rises. (The term Mark uses here is the term Jesus uses for “resurrection.”) Jesus tells her parents to give her something to eat.

These two stories – one sandwiched inside the other – are tied closely together. Both Jairus and the bleeding woman are desperate, coming to Jesus in the face of impossible odds. Both throw themselves prostrate at Jesus’ feet.

Each of the persons is called “daughter.” Each of them has ritual impurity – menstrual impurity in one case, and corpse impurity on the other. The little girl is twelve years old, and the bleeding woman has suffered for twelve years. Both are restored to fullness of life by Jesus’ power, a power that conquers death and its demonic source, the devil.

As we come to the Lord’s Table, it may be that you feel in a similar situation to that of these two women. You may feel isolated, alone, cut off, and facing impossible odds in your life. In such a situation, it is a good practice to do what Jairus and the bleeding woman did – humble yourself before Jesus. Fall at his feet and bring your faith – struggling and imperfect though it may be – to him. Receive the bread and wine, and pray for faith to see that it is *more* than bread and wine you are receiving. Then go in peace.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.