

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 1, 2012
Pentecost 5
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 15:7-15
Psalm 112
2 Corinthians 8:1-15
Mark 5:21-43

The portion of the Gospel of Mark which we've encountered last week and this week form a unit which has as its central theme the *power* of God. Last week we saw the power of God at work in Jesus as he stilled the violent storm on the Sea of Galilee. Today, we see God's power at work in Jesus as he demonstrates his Lordship over disease and over death itself.

Mark shows us Jesus' power through a technique he uses frequently, that of telling a story within a story. Our text begins with Jairus, a local synagogue leader, who comes to Jesus because his little girl is sick. In a move of great faith, he asks Jesus to come and lay his hands on her.

As Jesus embarks for Jairus' house, Mark inserts a story about a woman with a blood disorder who presses through a large crowd in order to touch Jesus' clothing and receive healing.

Why Mark tells these "stories within stories" we don't know for sure. Perhaps one reason is that he wants us to see that the stories are similar to each other and must be seen in relation to each other.

For instance, both of these stories share similar features:

- * Both deal with females, who were thought to be second class citizens in the first century;
- * Both females are “unclean” according to Jewish religious law and life
- * Both of these persons are healed by faith through Jesus’ touch and power
- * Jairus’ daughter is 12 years old; the sick woman has suffered for 12 years.

Both of these stories are fascinating, but I want to turn the zoom lens on to the story of the woman with the blood disorder.

One of the first things we notice about this lady is that she should not have even been in this large public crowd at all. In Leviticus 15, the Old Testament Law stipulated that persons with physical problems such as this were ritually “unclean,” and were not to come into contact with others. They were to be quarantined from the rest of the community.

What courage this woman must have had *even to be present in the crowd* on this occasion. No doubt her courage and faith were partly due to years of frustration that come from battling a medical problem for which you can find no diagnosis and relief.

At any rate, this suffering soul believes that if she can only get close enough to Jesus to touch his clothing, she will be made well. So, in a bold and *ironic* step of faith, she violates the letter of what her religious law tells her, and she presses forward toward her healing. Touching others was the one thing she was forbidden to do. Yet, she would not be denied until she touched this person named Jesus.

As she does, she is immediately healed, and she knows it.

But so does Jesus. Mark tells us that Jesus senses that healing power has gone out of him. Just as this woman has sensed a change in her body, so Jesus has sensed a change in his body. So he asks the disciples, “who touched me?”

And the disciples respond like you or I would. They say, “with a crowd like this, when you’re surrounded by wall-to-wall people, you want to know who touched you?”

But Jesus will not let the issue drop. He is not sure himself what has transpired, and there is no way he is going to allow for the “outflow” of his power without some acknowledgement.

This woman could have stolen away and enjoyed her healing. But she does not. She presents herself to him to reveal the truth. How difficult this must have been for her to do.

But why does Jesus not let the issue go? Is it for his sake, or for this poor woman’s sake?

I believe Jesus does it for the sake of this woman. I think this is an awesome act of compassion in addition to a miraculous healing.

For this woman’s healing has *social* consequences, not merely physical ones. This woman has faced isolation and oppression *socially* as well as physically. But in making this healing public, Jesus demonstrates that this woman

who has been isolated and cut off from normal life for so long can now resume a normal *relational life* in addition to a restored physical life.

Two clues reinforce this notion:

First, Jesus speaks to this woman and says, “daughter, your faith has *healed* you.” The term Jesus uses here for “healed” is the same term used for “salvation.” Jesus’ words can also be rendered, “your faith has saved you.” Jesus is showing that salvation involves *wholeness* -- physically, emotionally, and relationally.

A second clue: Jesus says to her, “go in peace.” This does not mean “be free from worry.” The phrase means, “be whole, be complete.”

So, what started out many years earlier as a serious illness, and what gradually became a hopeless and desperate situation, now ends in peace. What a great story.

But there is another reason why I focused on this portion of the Gospel lesson today. It happened quite by accident, but I discovered this week that John and Charles Wesley read this story through Eucharistic lenses.

This surprised me, because I have never seen this story as in any way touching upon the meaning of Holy Communion. After all, there are no references to food, to eating, or to the Last Supper.

But the Wesleys sure did. In their *Collection of Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, they included a hymn which is based on this Gospel text. It goes like this:

*Sinner, with awe draw near,
And find thy Savior here [i.e., at the Eucharist],
In his ordinances still,
 Touch his sacramental clothes;
 Present in his power to heal,
Virtue from his body flows.*

When I saw these words, the connection became clearer to me. Just as the woman in our story touched the clothing of Christ to receive her healing, so we too can have something tangible of Christ to “grab hold of” in the sacrament. And here’s the good part: the benefit is the same. Like her, we receive a glorious outpouring of Christ’s healing, saving power.

What a tremendous truth! As we tangibly touch the bread and the cup, Christ himself is present with us, and his power is available to us to meet our every need.

As I invite you to the Lord’s Table this morning, I do so by assuring you that the same power available to that troubled woman on that day is the same power available to you, and that the mysterious power of God is available to each of us through something as simple as bread and wine.

The Wesleys thought so too. Listen to the last verses of their hymn:

*His body is the seat
Where all our blessings meet
Full of unexhausted worth,
Still it makes the sinner whole,
Pours Divine effusions forth,
Life to every dying soul.*

*Pardon, and power, and peace,
And perfect righteousness
From that sacred Fountain springs;
Washed in his all-cleansing blood
Rise, ye worms, to priests and kings,
Rise in Christ, and reign with God.*

[Hymn no. 39, in *The Eucharist Hymns of John and Charles Wesley*. J. Ernest Rattenbury. Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 1990.]

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