

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today's gospel lesson from Mark includes a miracle within a miracle: the healing of the daughter of Jairus and the healing of the bleeding woman. They are part of the so-called "miracle section" of Mark which includes the calming of the storm and the demoniac and herd of swine stampeding into the sea. In these examples, "Jesus exercises his power over nature, over the demoniac army, over sickness, and over death." In today's episode, Jesus has returned to the other side of the lake, the Jewish side. We note this because it occurs in the presence of a leader of the synagogue, Jairus.

An important key to understanding Mark's intent here is the subject of uncleanness or *ritual impurity* in the first century. Both the woman and the girl here are unclean by the standards of the time. They suffer from two of the three most important examples of uncleanness: leprosy, bodily discharges, and contact with the dead. All of the characters in the 5th chapter of Mark's gospel transfer their uncleanness to Jesus, and he in turn bestows the cleaning wholeness of God upon each. In a sense, this part of chapter 5 might well be called the "St. Jude chapter" because St. Jude is the saint of hopeless causes. In this case, those hopeless causes are: the Gerasene demoniac, the menstruating woman in today's reading as well as Jairus who has exhausted his faith in the recovery of his daughter.

Uncleanness in the first century referred to things which the general population regarded as ones to be avoided, not because they were unhygienic so much as that one recoiled in the presence of them. Most societies have an aversion to the presence of certain states which elicit a kind of collective "ugh!" A sense that the thing in question is somehow "icky." In the case of first century Jews, the belief was that if you touched an unclean thing or person, you yourself became unclean. Unclean was the opposite of holy. As such, you were unfit to enter the holy temple to worship until you had been cleansed of your unfitness. It has to do with one's relationship with God. Unclean things were regarded as estranged from God and each other. They were not supposed to be touched.

But Jesus mixed everything up. He did not become unclean in the presence of unclean people or things. His own holiness seemed to transform those who were impure. The flow of blood stopped. The woman was healed. The corpse came back to life. The young girl got out of bed and returned to health. Jesus did not turn away in the presence of things or people most Jews would have regarded as unclean. In essence, he raised them up to a level of cleanness not normally available to the afflicted. He made them worthy to be in the presence of God.

Touch is also related to healing in Mark. For example, when Jairus approached Jesus, he did so in equating the "laying on of hands" with "salvation," "healing," and "life." The menstruating woman believed that simply touching the hem of the garment Jesus was wearing would be sufficient to restore her to full health. It also has to do with *relationships*. Jesus calls the woman who touches him "daughter" because he established a personal relationship with her. But whereas she wants a cure from something,

Jesus desires a personal encounter with someone.” In the kingdom of God, “miracle leads to meeting.” Discipleship is not simply about getting one’s needs met. It is “being in the presence of Jesus, being known by him, and following him.” *Fear and faith* are also related in Mark. When Jesus tells the menstruating woman that her faith has healed her, he is indicating not only that she believed she would be healed but that she *also acted upon that faith*. It is more than telling oneself this truth but also *acting upon* that belief.

We can also learn something about uncleanness through the behavior of the *crowds* in Mark. Unlike in Matthew, in Mark’s account the crowds not only point to “the extraordinary impact of Jesus’ ministry,” but also at times actually pose physical dangers as they press in around Jesus. The hemorrhage makes the woman approaching Jesus in today’s reading ritually impure. But she still hopes that “an unobtrusive touch in the middle of the crowd will bring healing.” However, Jesus stops and makes her action public. That her reaction to this was to come “in fear and trembling” suggests that she sensed how out-of-place she was surrounded by a crowd of fellow Jews all bent on being in the presence of Jesus. Someone who was ritually impure would have had an overwhelming sense of estrangement in a large audience of excited and anxious countrymen.

If we stand back a bit and try to take in the whole scene here, there are a number of themes that emerge. First, the life of Jesus (along with his death) grants life-changing healing. And it is a healing authority that crosses boundaries, both ethnic and gender ones. And Jesus chooses not to leave people in the conditions in which he finds them, and he has the power to alter those conditions. In part, then, I believe we are challenged by these stories to dare to cross the boundaries we encounter in our own time, boundaries that keep us from fully embracing the message and ministry of Jesus and experiencing the life-changing power of his message of radical love which is so clearly demonstrated in today’s gospel lesson.

But we should not be led astray here into thinking that Jesus has somehow solved all of the problems confronted by the characters he helps in these stories. We should not be deceived into thinking that Jesus is offering a quick fix to monumental, ongoing problems. The woman with the hemorrhage is poor and without a family, so although Jesus leaves her healed and restored to the community, “the effects of a dozen years of social isolation don’t vanish so quickly, and she must still face the harsh realities of life as an apparently abandoned peasant woman in first century Palestine.” The daughter of Jairus “will live the rest of her life a poor woman in a land under Roman occupation. If she lives another forty years, she will watch the first Jewish revolt be crushed by two future emperors, Vespasian and his son, Titus, who will then sack Jerusalem and destroy the temple.”

Although Jesus makes no promises about changing the very real facts of life which remain always in the background for all of us, what he does do is to *be present* with those who are suffering. Thus, the *encounter* with Jesus appears to be just as important as whatever healing acts he performs --- perhaps

more important. I've never forgotten what I learned in seminary in my Clinical Pastoral Education program at NYU Hospital.: when you call on people who are ill, even those in desperation, it is more important to offer them your quiet presence and reassurance than an actual cure or an empty recitation of scriptural passages. We are all in need of connection, of the wholeness that comes from the presence in our lives of those who care deeply and genuinely about our welfare.

We are not encouraged to view Jesus as a mere magician. The kind of healing Jesus offers is deeper than that and more lasting. Transient fixes are not the final answer to our loneliness or despair or emptiness. And Jesus always addresses those issues even though he does not promise to personally intervene to eliminate them from our lives because they are constants of the human condition. There is, in fact, no remedy for those deeper problems other than to turn to God for the kind of peace only he can offer us. When the woman with the hemorrhage reaches out in desperation for a cure by touching the garment Jesus wears, she is driven more by fear than boldness. And he, in turn, engages her directly and personally in all of her loneliness and suffering, offering more than freedom from disease; what he offers is wholeness and peace which in the end count for more than mere relief from physical suffering. Being restored to a place in the larger community is more important to her than simply stemming the bleeding. To feel like the rest of us: fully engaged as part of a society that recognizes our individual worth. And it is the same with us. We are looking for something deeper and more permanent than a one-time miracle cure.

In the lovely words of Psalm 30:

*I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up,
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.*

*O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.*

*O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.*

*Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.*

*For his anger is but for a moment;
his favour is for a lifetime.*

*Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.*

Amen.

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