

## Do not Fear; only Believe

January 24, 2016

Mark 5:21-43

In what feels like another lifetime, I preached on the story of the hemorrhaging woman. Looking back on what I recall of what I said, I've done my share of cringing. I was a summer student pastor, having finished one year of seminary. In a moment of compassionate insight this week for my younger self, I realized why I was cringing. In that long-ago time, I was newly finding and testing my pastoral and interpretive voice, and so approached this woman's story wanting her to use her voice. I was not very understanding of her secretive approach to Jesus. I wanted her to boldly stand before him and ask for healing. Multiple decades later, I realize that finding and using our voices is a lifelong journey, there are many ways to approach Jesus and make our needs known, and speaking out doesn't always require words; but they all require courage and vulnerability in their own way. And I'm also much more aware of how and when certain voices are silenced, and of the incredible courage it takes, sometimes, to speak out. And sometimes, there is no more energy or will to speak out, because you've been beaten down and silenced for so long.

Here we have a story, or really, 2 stories, of 2 encounters with Jesus. Each of these stories could stand alone. On their own, they are incredible stories of healing. We don't know if they happened in the way they are recounted in the first 3 gospels, or if they were separate incidents. What we do know, is that Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell these stories in this same way; Jairus first approaches Jesus about his sick daughter; on the way to Jairus' house, a hemorrhaging woman touches the hem of Jesus' garment; before Jesus gets to Jairus' house, his daughter dies. What is interesting about these 3 accounts is that Mark's is the longer, more detailed account. Usually, Mark is the cryptic gospel, telling us only what it is we need to know. But with these stories, it is Matthew that is the most cryptic, and Mark who gives us the most details. While these stories can stand alone, there is something the gospel writers want us to hear or see in telling them together.

In Mark's account of these stories, there is dramatic tension and suspense as we witness an unclean, unnamed woman interrupt Jesus and the powerful religious leader who is a man and has a name, Jairus. Jesus and Jairus are on an important

mission—to save Jairus’ daughter. How dare this unclean woman interrupt their mission! What will Jesus do? How will Jairus respond?

The tension builds as Jesus demands to know who touched him, and his disciples, in disbelief, question his sanity. “You want to know who touched you! Are you kidding?! Look at this crowd. Of course someone touched you! Everyone is touching everyone else!” But Jesus persists in calling out the person whose touch affected him.

We, along with the crowd, hold our breath to see if the woman will come forward, for we, the readers/hearers of the story, know that it is this unnamed, unclean woman who has touched Jesus. Will she have the courage to own up to this act that has so obviously affected Jesus? Will she have the courage to make her unclean touch known, for in so doing, she is admitting to making Jesus, and likely others in the crowd, unclean. And we hold our breath because Jairus’ daughter isn’t getting any better while Jesus pauses in his journey to heal her.

The tension is only somewhat broken as she steps forward and falls at Jesus’ feet in fear and trembling, confessing all. It is a bold, courageous move on her part, but what option does she have? She knows she has been healed; but what good is that healing, she must have realized moments after it happened, if she can’t actually tell others that she has been healed? I mean, how do you admit to entering a crowd and touching someone’s clothing? It would be seen as a blatant disregard for religious and societal rules.

And so, she makes herself, this bold, desperate action, and her story in all its vulnerable awfulness known, not only to Jesus, but to her whole community. She is not the first, or the last unnamed woman whose life is laid bare before Jesus and a crowd of onlookers. She joins the unnamed woman of John’s gospel (John 8:1-11) whose story of being caught in adultery and brought to Jesus we heard a few weeks ago. She joins too, the unnamed woman in Luke’s gospel (Luke 7:36-50), a sinner, who enters Simon the Pharisee’s house uninvited, and who washes Jesus’ feet with her tears, dries them with her hair and then anoints them with expensive oil. These women know their place in society, but they also know their great need and Jesus’ capacity to meet that need, and so they come to, or find themselves at, the feet of Jesus, their lives and their stories splayed open before onlookers who lack Jesus’ capacity for compassion.

And then Jesus speaks. “Daughter, your faith has saved you—or made you well; go in peace—literally, go into peace—and be healed of your disease.” With these words, he heals her past, restores her into community and sends her into her future in peace. (Timothy Geddert, *BCBC*, p. 121) While she sought physical healing, and thought she could get it anonymously, and certainly, her faith in his power to heal her worked, Jesus knew that wasn’t enough. It isn’t enough to heal a physical condition that keeps someone isolated from their community, without letting the community know that this person has been healed; without signaling to the community that this person is now clean. It is this second healing, this restoration to community, that is the more significant healing in this story. While we don’t know her name, Jesus names her Daughter, thus restoring her to her spiritual and communal family.

We aren’t allowed to get too caught up in this moment before we learn that Jairus’ daughter has died. The advice to Jairus is not to trouble Jesus anymore; the inevitable has happened, and what’s left to do is the work of mourning and burial. We are told that Jesus overhears this—some older manuscripts say that Jesus ignores this; the word used here means both of those things. (Timothy Geddert, *BCBC*, p. 122) Jesus both hears what is said, and ignores it, when he turns to Jairus and says, “Do not fear, only believe, or keep on believing.” (Timothy Geddert, *BCBC*, p. 122) It is these 3 verses, 34, 35 and 36, that are the crux of these 2 stories. The woman is affirmed for her faith, which has saved or healed her. Jairus is told to believe—believe like this woman believed; and keep on believing like he did when he first came to Jesus to beg for his daughter’s healing. “Do not listen to this message, which is about death. Come with me, instead.”

Jesus now limits who can come with him. He takes Peter, James and John, plus Jairus. They arrive at Jairus’ house to a commotion of mourners weeping and wailing. He tells them that the girl is not dead, but sleeping. At these words, the mourners go from weeping to laughing at Jesus. He kicks them out of the house, goes with the father and mother to the child’s side, takes her hand and says words she’s probably heard her mother say to her many mornings, “Little girl, get up!” (Timothy Geddert, *BCBC*, p. 123)

And with these words, she got up and walked around. Those who witnessed this were “overcome with amazement”, verse 42 says. Jesus says no one should know this, and then says they should give the girl something to eat. Both of these things

are a bit curious. In the last story, what could have been kept quiet—that the woman was healed—was made public; here, what will very quickly be public is to remain secret. Why might this be? In both of these stories, there would be the tendency toward belief in magic. The woman thinks that if she just touches the hem of his garment, she will be healed. If Jesus hadn't asked her to step forward, she might have thought it was the hem that healed her, not Jesus. And of course, it was very important that she be restored to community.

In the case of Jairus and his daughter, the mourners who laugh at Jesus and then are filled with amazement, may not have the faith to see that this was a miraculous healing, not an act of magic. The message they would spread about Jesus would not be an accurate account of who Jesus is. Jesus doesn't want people to follow him because of the sensational things he does; he's not looking for people to be wowed or awed; Jesus wants people to follow him who know the power he has to meet their deepest needs and longings. He has power to give them life and to change their lives. Asking people to feed the girl shows Jesus' compassion, and also signals that she is really alive—physically and bodily. In asking them to feed her, Jesus gives her back her humanity.

This woman and Jairus' daughter are connected in a number of ways. The woman has been bleeding for as long as Jairus' daughter has been alive. Life is literally draining out of these 2 women. The woman has been bleeding for 12 years, and Jairus' daughter is 12 years old, the age at which Jewish girls enter womanhood and are considered old enough to marry. Without Jesus' touch, neither will have a future or a life worth living.

The condition of both of them—the bleeding and death—makes them religiously unclean. Anyone who would come into contact with either one of them would themselves be rendered unclean. It is important to note, though, that their uncleanness is not a result of sin. Unlike the woman caught in adultery, or the woman who enters Simon's house, neither of these 2 women has committed a sin that renders them unclean. Their uncleanness is a result of what their bodies are doing—bleeding—or have ceased to do—live.

The difference between these 2 though, in relation to their uncleanness, is that the woman has been unclean for 12 years, whereas Jairus' daughter has not been dead for very long. For 12 years, this woman has lived in social isolation. When

the bleeding started, it turned her from a religious woman with social connections, perhaps even a husband and children, into an unclean woman deprived of any social, religious or physical contact. Anything or anyone she touched would become unclean; anything or anyone who touched her became unclean. It is impossible even to live in the same house with her, as everything is perpetually unclean. She is ceremonially unclean, so she can't go into the synagogue. If she ventured out in public, it is likely she would have had to announce her unclean presence to those around her, so that they would be able to move away from her, so as not to become unclean themselves by her touch.

A life of utter isolation and likely desperation that is reversed when she touches Jesus. For both of these women, it is the power of Jesus' touch that brings life. Jesus would technically be unclean from coming into contact with both of these women, but shows that he has the power to banish the uncleanness. The power of Jesus' touch is the power that brings life. Rather than becoming unclean himself, he drives away the uncleanness of illness and death. ([www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), "I love to tell the story" podcast) With Jesus' touch, "both daughters are restored to fullness of life as women." (Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Women's Bible Commentary*, p. 483)

There's one final connection, not between the 2 women, but between the woman and Jairus. That connection is the posture they both take before Jesus—they both fall at his feet. The powerful, male religious leader with a name, and the vulnerable, nameless woman both throw themselves at Jesus' feet and ask for what they need. It is definitely not the posture of a powerful man, but Jairus falls at Jesus' feet 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." He has faith that Jesus can heal her, and he falls at his feet to ask him to heal her. The woman who has been healed of her hemorrhage has been isolated and alone for 12 years, and falls at Jesus' feet, afraid of what he will do or say to her, and tells him the whole truth.

It would be easy to end here, but we need to be cautious about how it is we view the healing that happened here in these 2 stories, and the faith that Jesus affirms and calls for. These aren't stories about believing hard enough, and praying hard enough, and then physical healing happens; and if it doesn't, then it is because you didn't pray or believe enough—your faith wasn't good enough or strong enough. Lots of damage has been done in the name of faith through the

promotion of that belief. But these stories are about laying our needs before God—throwing ourselves at Jesus’ feet and begging for what we need; asking Jesus for what we most desire. What these stories, and Jesus, promise us is that Jesus will hear our cries and in his great mercy, will give us what he knows we need, even if it isn’t what we think we need. These 2 stories are about being given life in all its fullness; receiving healing and restoration in community.

There are many ways to come to Jesus and make our needs known to him. Through words and actions, we can speak our need. At some point, powerful and vulnerable alike find ourselves at Jesus’ feet. It is there that we let our need and our vulnerability be known to him. All of us, vulnerable and powerful alike, have times when we find we need to throw ourselves at Jesus’ feet and beg for mercy, or healing, or whatever else it is we need. It is at the feet of Jesus that we find ourselves accepted, named, and loved; it is at the feet of Jesus that we receive what we need so we can go into the future in peace—Daughter, your faith has saved you; go in peace. Let it be so.