

Riverside United Church
January 28, 2024

Scripture Lesson: Mark 5:21-43

A Girl Restored to Life and a Woman Healed

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his 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.' So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.' Immediately her haemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?"' He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

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?' But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, 'Do not fear, only believe.' He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.' 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. He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha cum', which means, 'Little girl, get up!' And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

"Two Stories - Many Responses"

We have just heard the scripture reading and it tells two stories about the healing work of Jesus. As you listened to those words and saw the images, what response came to mind: comfort, amazement, skepticism, longing, surprise, perplexment, disappointment, doubt, hope ... What questions or experiences were invoked with this reading from the account of Jesus' ministry?

The author of Mark begins to tell a story about Jairus coming to Jesus with the urgent demand to come and see his sick daughter. Jesus agrees, and that story is interrupted with a story about a woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years who gets close enough to touch the cloak of Jesus. That action of touching prompts an encounter that ends with healing and wholeness. News comes that Jairus' daughter

has died and yet when Jesus gets there he announces that she is only asleep and she rises from her bed with much gratitude from her parents.

I have mentioned before that the healing stories of Jesus always leave me with questions more than amazement. They are great miracle stories and yet I wonder how much authority do we give them in our own context and understanding. We have a great deal of knowledge about the human body and we have a variety of experiences and stories of health realities for ourselves and family members and friends. And there is danger that these miracle story become our expectation.

I know that my response to healing stories of faith is affected by images of television evangelism, that I have seen, conducting healing on demand and with great drama. There is something about assembly line healing that seems phoney. And yet I know that this is not what the biblical stories are. What expectations do these stories nurture and what is the connection between faith and healing?

As we listen to these stories, there are many responses. I expect that there were many responses at the time. Let's imagine that we have access to other accounts of that day from three characters in the story. First, let us imagine we are reading Jairus' journal for that day so many years ago:

"Well this has been quite a day. After spending some time at the synagogue I received word that I must come home immediately, because Rachel, my little one, was getting much worse. We had called on every doctor that we knew, but none could help her. I worried that I was going home to watch my daughter die.

It just happens that a popular healer was in town -- a Galilean called Jesus. I debated for awhile about approaching him -- What would people think? -- but I finally decided I had no choice. I am glad that I did, because he immediately agreed to come and see her. I'll never forget what he said to me: "Do not fear, only believe."

Jesus came and said that Rachel was not dead, but only asleep, but there was great weeping and wailing as the doctor had already pronounced her dead. What a great moment when Rachel sat up and walked. It was incredible! I guess that YHWH saw to it that Rachel was healed. It couldn't have been MY faith that did it, though. I was skeptical all along! But now it has reached a deeper level. I won't even try to explain it, but I will try to live with more trust in God and less fear."

But Jairus was not the only one in the story. He is the only one named, but there were others mentioned in the gospel story and others that we can imagine being in the story. Remember the crowd, and the many people who called out to Jesus for help. We hear the response to one woman, but let's imagine another woman in that crowd, a woman with an incurable disease, writing a letter that evening to a friend who has sent medicine to ease her pain:

"I spent the morning today down by the sea. A large crowd had gathered to see the latest miracle worker, they call this one Jesus. Isaac still tells me I'm wasting my time, that none of these miracle workers can really heal people. But I still went. Jesus talked with many people, one woman who has been a recluse for many years, and a man who I have seen at the synagogue. But I couldn't get close to him, I didn't even have a chance. It would have been nice to tell him about my illness, he seems to know the thing to say. "Go in peace" he said to that recluse woman, and she left with a smile on her face. "Do not fear, only believe." That's what he said to the man from the synagogue, when they came to tell him his daughter had died. I try not to be afraid. I try to believe. I go to the synagogue and I pray so hard. But I am still sick. Why have I not been healed?"

There was another onlooker that day, an officer of the governor's court. He joined the crowd, out of curiosity, and decided to stick around to see the results. Later that day he sent this report to his superior:

"I can't believe what I saw and overheard today. A miracle worker, called Jesus, went to Jairus' house today. Supposedly Jairus' daughter was ill unto death and yet this Jesus made her walk with a few

words. I don't know what all the fuss was about - Jesus himself said that she was only asleep. These Hebrew physicians are so primitive, I don't doubt that they could even get THAT wrong!

"I can't believe that these religious fanatics bother with such charlatans. They have to be phoney. If they really were vessels of God, then all people everywhere would be healed. If their god really cared at all, there wouldn't be sickness and suffering in the first place. I think it's all in the mind. And I hope that I never slip into such blind faith!"

The same day - the same incident and yet three different perspectives. I realize that these are far from historically accurate, but the fact is that in any situation when someone talks about healing and faith, you'll probably find those three reactions: one who as seen and believes, one who wonders why the healing hasn't happened for them or someone they love and one who doesn't believe at all. Each of these perspectives gives us a glimpse of the struggle of faith. Three reactions that may all be wrestling with one another, even within our own minds and souls.

One of the paths of reflection from these stories that may help us to find meaning and wisdom is to explore the words that Jesus says to the woman and to Jairus. We hear Jesus say to the woman, "Your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your disease." And to Jairus, he says, "Do not fear, only believe."

What is the connection between faith and health? Can faith be a source of healing? These are challenging questions and we are not the first to ask them or to wrestle with them?

In scripture, there is an ongoing assumption at work that suffering was seen as a punishment from God. It is not an idea promoted by all the leaders and prophets, but it is has that is popularity, that is hard to counter. I expect that many in the crowd who noticed or ignored the woman who was hemorrhaging probably thought that she had done something to cause her status as an outcast. What is great in the story is that she didn't accept that classification and sought all she could for healing. When she touches the robe of Jesus, he feels the transfer of energy that reinvigorated her body towards healing.

Jairus' doubts how his faith has contributed because he has been skeptical.

Faith is not a guarantee of blessing. Faith is not having a correct set of beliefs. Faith is not wishing for what we don't understand. Faith is trust. A sense of trust that we are not alone. A trust and assurance that we will know strength, comfort, peace that will enable us to live through the variety of circumstances and experiences that come our way.

With that trust and assurance, we are able to live with persistence to find healing, to live with courage amidst illness, to live amidst suffering finding a path of peace and hope. Faith does not compete with disease for power within the body. We trust that we are not alone, as we know that some realities can be cured or healed and some remain unsolvable.

We give thanks for the mystery and wonder of healing. We give thanks for the medical knowledge that has led to renewal of life for so many persons and health realities. And we recognize that there is still a sense of mystery to much of our health. I know that there are stories of healing where there is little medical explanation. I know that there are healing methods that do not fit the medical framework. There is Holy Energy at work that heals - not only body, but mind and soul, and that there are still many who long for some explanation or some miracle.

Illness and disease is not a punishment from God. Our bodies and beings are complex and there are many factors at work.

So we are invited to trust and to live in the way revealed by Jesus, to care and support one another, so that we can know fullness of life through whatever realities we live.

Rob Johns, who was a United Church minister when he died, wrote a very poetic statement of faith as he lived with cancer. We will sing it together in a few moments.

In suffering love, the thread of life, is woven through our care,
for God is with us, not alone our pain and toil we bear.

With varied responses and realities, let us have the trust and courage to live, to live in faith and go in peace. Amen.