

## MADE WHOLE BY FAITH

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The Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
June 28, 2009

2 Samuel 1:17-27; Psalms 30, 130; Mark 5:21-43; 2 Corinthians 6:1-10

"Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."  
– Mark 5:34

Today's gospel lesson uses a narrative device called "framing", in which the story of Jairus's daughter comes both before and after a second story. In our Bible study class this past Lenten season, we learned that this device is used several times in the Gospel of Mark to emphasize important points of teaching and practice in his early Christian community<sup>1</sup>.

At first glance, these appear to be YAMS: "Yet Another Miracle Story": A story about the miraculous healing of a hemorrhagic woman is framed within a story about the miraculous raising of the daughter of Jairus, a "leader of the synagogue." In ancient religions, these stories of extraordinary events served two purposes: to demonstrate the power of a god or gods, and to prove that a particular person or nation was their particular favorite. In this ancient tradition, these stories would be taken to represent Jesus as a sort of "pipeline to God" - a conduit of healing power, that is passed on by touch and speech.

But we do not live in the Roman-occupied Palestine of 2000 years ago, and Jesus the Healer no longer walks among us in the flesh to heal our physical bodies. There is no "Jesus plan" for health care cost containment. We should not expect God to do for us what we can do for ourselves and for each other. The healing of our bodies, and of those aspects of mental illness that can be helped by physical means, are better left to medicine and science.

Fortunately for us, these stories have deeper, symbolic meanings that are timeless. They are like a finger pointing at the moon: to miss their deeper meaning is like not knowing the difference between the finger and the moon - not very useful if you are trying to get to the moon. And simply taking these stories literally as a matter of blind faith is not very useful if you are trying to live your life according to an intelligent and informed faith.

The symbolism of these stories would have been understood by Mark's audience: a community of Hellenized Jewish converts to Christianity, whose scriptures would have come from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Jewish Bible. This is apparent by the fact that Mark feels obligated to translate the Aramaic phrase *Tal'itha, cu'mi* to "Little girl, I say to you, arise."<sup>2</sup>

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1 Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2007, pp.32-36.

2 Mark 5:41 (RSV)

Mark's readers, as literate Jews, would be familiar with the book of Leviticus. This was essentially a manual for the Levites, the hereditary caste of the Temple priests, containing detailed instructions on how to maintain the level of ritual purity required to perform their Temple rites and ceremonies. In particular, Mark's readers would know of the following instructions<sup>3</sup>:

If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her impurity, or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her impurity, all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness; as in the days of her impurity, she shall be unclean. Every bed on which she lies during all the days of her discharge shall be treated as the bed of her impurity; and everything on which she sits shall be unclean, as in the uncleanness of her impurity. Whoever touches these things shall be unclean, and shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening.

The priest who is exalted above his fellows, on whose head the anointing oil has been poured and who has been consecrated to wear the vestments, shall not dishevel his hair, nor tear his vestments. He shall not go where there is a dead body; he shall not defile himself even for his father or mother.

In Mark's stories, Jesus was able to perform miracles of healing even though he touched, and let himself be touched by, those who were considered "impure". The source of healing power does not lie in rituals and ceremonies. Healing does not come from just following the rules, saying just the right prayers in just the right way, and associating with only the right kind of people.

Mark's readers would also have understood the symbolic meaning of the *kind of healing* that took place. Mark is very careful to tell us that the daughter of Jairus was twelve years old – approaching marriageable age in her community. Mark's readers would have understood that by bringing her back from death, and by healing the hemorrhagic woman, Jesus was restoring their ability to become productive members of the community.

The point of these stories is not that the only way a woman can contribute to the community is by marrying and having children! Rather, like the finger pointing at the moon, the *symbolic* content is pointing to the truth that *spiritual* healing has two dimensions: healing **from** the distress of spiritual "dis-ease", and healing **to** regain the ability to contribute to the well-being of ourselves and others. The phrase "made whole" from the King James version of today's gospel text is appropriate for this kind of healing – it mends our spiritual brokenness and reunites us with God's world and its people.

Paul is making the same point in the Epistle reading for today<sup>4</sup>, where he takes the Corinthians down a notch for their excessive spiritual pride and challenges them to walk the talk:

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<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 15: 25-27, 21:10-11

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Now as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you – so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

What is this “spiritual disease,” this brokenness to be mended by “spiritual healing” that “makes us rich”? It is what the Buddhists call *dukkha*, a kind of suffering known to all ages and cultures, and which is best translated as *anguish*. Buddha described it like this around 400BC:

“Now this is the noble truth of anguish: Birth is stressful, aging is stressful, death is stressful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair are stressful; association with the unbeloved is stressful, separation from the loved is stressful, not getting what is wanted is stressful. In short, clinging to the things of this world is stressful.”

This is the kind of anguish that we hear in David's lamentation<sup>5</sup> for his friend Jonathan and his benefactor, Jonathan's father Saul, the king whose place David has taken: “How the mighty are fallen!” The “ruddy and handsome” youth who exulted in his victory over Goliath had learned how quickly jealousy can turn friendship into enmity, and how quickly death can take away all – friends and enemies alike.

Whenever we suffer loss, or fail to get what we want, it is easy to give in to anguish and despair. The opposite of faith is not *disbelief*, but *despair*, that is, *hopelessness*. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Søren Kierkegaard, in his analysis of Jesus' saying in the raising of Lazarus that “this sickness is not unto death<sup>6</sup>”, came to the conclusion that *despair itself* is the real sickness unto death. How can we be healed of this “dis-ease”?

In Mark's stories, each extraordinary event of healing was preceded by an extraordinary event not just of *faith*, but of *courage* and *hope*. It took real courage for a leader of the synagogue to come to this itinerant preacher and miracle worker and beg for the life of his daughter, and for that very ill woman to make her way through the crowd pressing around him in order just to touch his cloak.

In the fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, we see a centurion, the commander of a unit of 100 foot soldiers of the Roman imperial army of occupation, exercising the same kind of courage to humble himself and ask for the healing of his servant in the famous words: “Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof, but speak the word only and my servant shall be healed.”<sup>7</sup>

In all these cases, Jesus represented for these people their last, extraordinary hope after all ordinary measures had failed. Their faith consisted not just of *believing* this or that about Jesus, but in *not giving in to hopelessness*.

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5 2 Samuel 1:17-27

6 John 11:4.

7 Matthew 8:8 (King James Version)

The only real defense against despair is *courage*, the kind of courage that Paul Tillich identified as the "courage to be"<sup>8</sup>. The *healing of hopelessness* begins with the courage to *abandon all hopes* based on the worldly calculus of gain and loss, praise and blame, success and failure, pleasure and pain. As Joni Mitchell sang forty years ago,

"...We are caught in the Devil's bargain,  
and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden<sup>9</sup>."

If we cannot put our hopes in the world's promises, then where shall we turn for the healing of our anguish? That's really a topic for another whole sermon, but Psalm 130 is a good place to start:<sup>10</sup>:

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in His word I hope;  
my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.  
O Israel, hope in the LORD!  
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,  
and with Him is great power to redeem.

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8 Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, Yale University Press, 1952.

9 Joni Mitchell, "Woodstock" (1969)

10 Psalm 130:5-7