

Faith or Doubt, God Heals Mark 5:21-43 Rev. Brian Bagley-Bonner

Two very different healings take place in today's Gospel reading. First, we hear about the young daughter of a leader of the synagogue who is at death's door. Jesus has compassion for her father, and immediately goes with him to see her. It is worth remembering that even though we are in the early chapters of Mark's Gospel, some Synagogue leaders have already been criticizing Jesus heavily, even saying he is able to heal because he is demon-possessed. So his willingness to encourage the man and go right away shows a high level of graciousness on Jesus' part.

So Jesus, his disciples, and a large group are walking toward Jairus' home when Jesus suddenly stops and says, "Who touched me?" Now the disciples, practical, no-nonsense fishermen look at him and say, "Are you kidding me? You're surrounded by a moving crowd. Rabbis – oy!" But Jesus is not troubled by their response and he waits and a woman confesses to touching his clothes and then tells him her story. One reason she hasn't just asked Jesus to heal her is that she is and has been for all the years of her suffering, religiously isolated. As a woman who is viewed as perpetually menstruating, she is forbidden to have contact with any man, and certainly not a Rabbi or Priest. So not only has she lost all her money to doctors and healers, but she has been isolated from the religious life of her community. Jesus does not chide her for making him unclean, but blesses her saying, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, be healed of your disease." Jesus had not directed healing power to her, instead he says that her faith has made her well – that her faith was the way God was able to heal her, and now she can go forth in peace

And what about the woman's own experience? The scripture says, "Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease." She actually feels her body being restored before Jesus stops to look for her.

It is clear from this story that Jesus is a conduit for healing power but that power comes from outside his consciousness. The implication is that God healed the woman because of her faith. Healing in the Gospel is powerfully connected to faith. Belief in God's power, in this case through Jesus, is what brings healing to the woman. It is interesting that she just touches the hem of his robe... Again, this protects Jesus from becoming ritually unclean, but this theme of touching something Jesus himself has touched is fascinating. This idea is picked up in the Book of Acts chapter 19 where it says, "God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out." We humans know the power of touch, even 2nd hand touch when the person is not present. In some ways it seems like even faith in someone else's faith has the power to ignite God's healing love. The power of faith is amazing.

Ah, but we have strayed from the first story, Jesus and the crowd turn toward Jairus' home, but alas, the girl has died before Jesus could get there. And yet, Jesus encourages Jairus, saying 'Do not fear, only believe.' Jesus shrinks the crowd to the closest disciples and heads to the house where all are weeping and mourning. There are people there from the Synagogue; there might be some women who come from the community to help the family mourn for some small consideration which was the custom then. But when Jesus gives his diagnosis of the situation, they do not quietly step back, but they laugh at him. They show no faith in him as an instrument of God's healing. In fact, quite the opposite, they make fun of him for his faith in God to heal this girl. Jesus has those that laugh - leave, and with the disciples and parents he goes in and brings the little girl back from death.

In this healing, Jesus is able to be an instrument of God even when there is a lack of faith. Oh, some present believe, and the laughing doubters have been sent away, but

their laughter still rings in the ears of the heart-broken parents, the disciples and even Jesus himself. But in spite of that doubt, the girl is healed, she gets up. Why, because the power of God to heal is not daunted by doubt. God heals, not us, our faith or our lack of it cannot stop the healing power of God's love and grace.

So here we are at a bit of a quandry. The Gospel seems to say both that our faith is what brings God's healing, and also, that our doubt cannot stop God's healing. This reminds me of a piece of dialogue from *Fiddler on the Roof*, where Perchik, a revolutionary student from the city, tries to convince the people of the village to get involved in the world's issues. But Tevye (the protagonist of the show) and his friends are not sure. One of the friends, Mordecha, answers the young Student: "Why should I break my head about the outside world? Let the outside world break its own head.

And ***Tevye replies: He is right. As the Good Book says, "If you spit in the air, it lands in your face."***

But Perchik answers back: Nonsense. You can't close your eyes to what's happening in the world. To which Tevye says: He is right.

Wise Avram then challenges Tevye: He's right and he's right? They can't both be right.

And Tevye thinks a moment and says: "You know, you are also right."

The truth of the matter is that, like much of scripture, the question of healing is not an either/or, but a both/and. Yes, our faith can do amazing things; bring healing, hope, justice, grace. AND God can accomplish all these things even when we doubt. We must live with the Biblical ambiguity of these two truths. We must put one in each pocket and bring them out when they are needed. We must have faith, and we need not fear or punish or blame ourselves when faith is hard to muster. God heals every time. Now it is not always the way we would want it, a person sometimes dies from their illness when we would prefer they be cured and stay here with us, but God makes them whole even though they die. We must never assume that our prayers fail for lack of faith. God knows we are human. Nor must we ever assume that our faith guarantees the

outcome we want. We know that is just not true. And so when we seek healing we continue to pray and have faith and seek to trust God no matter the outcome. We are powerful beyond words, our faith can bring healing. And God is the source, and unless God does the work, our labor and faith can be in vain. The genius of the Gospel is that we can find these two opposites in just one small story of two healings. May God grant us wisdom to know and accept how healing will come to us when we receive it. AMEN

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 hemorrhages 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 hemorrhage 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.