

sermon-6/28/09 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“The Ultimate Health Care Plan”  
Mark 5:21-43  
By Jim Patten

Our passage for today gives us one of Mark’s favorite techniques. He loves to put a story within a story. He starts telling us one story only to have it interrupted by another before he gets back to finishing the first. The two stories play off of each other. They are meant to enrich the message Mark was trying to tell in his gospel.

That is certainly true with these healing stories in chapter five. There are great parallels between the two as well as some interesting contrasts. Let’s look at a few of those as we begin.

Both stories are about females being healed. Both females go unnamed in the stories. The only name we hear is that of the prominent man in the story, Jairus. One of the females was his daughter. The other female was an unnamed woman who seemingly did not have a man to intercede for her. She was an outcaste, someone who counted, in that culture, even less than the female child of a prominent man. As one commentator said, this woman would not have been welcomed in Jairus’ synagogue. She was ritually unclean because of her blood illness.

Actually, both the females in this story ended up being unclean. The book of Leviticus makes it clear that if a woman had a bleeding problem she was unwelcome in any public gathering. She was as good as dead while her illness lasted. The little girl was literally dead. Once she died, she was the most unclean of all. If one touched a corpse, they too, became unclean and unable to worship with the community or perform any part in the service until they did what Leviticus said was required of them.

Yet, Mark says, when Jesus was touched by the woman and when he touches the corpse of the young girl by taking her hand, instead of his becoming unclean, both females become clean. The woman’s flow of blood stops and the young girl comes back to life. Once again, Jesus reverses expectations.

Both healing stories involve faith. In the one the faith was exhibited by the woman herself. In the other it was the faith of the father of the young girl that mattered. In both stories those who had faith had to come to terms with their own fears.

All of this is to say there are some important parallels in these stories as well as some striking differences. We could explore those in more detail. Instead I would like us to look at how sickness affects our spiritual journey. As one scholar has noted, “Sickness complicates faith, making simple, shallow answers irrelevant.” He says, “This complication brings forth blessing.” We are going to look at the complication and the blessing as it comes to us in the middle story that interrupts the main story in our passage. We are going to focus on the woman with the flow of blood.

Wil Willimon says this woman must not have lived in Canada. If she had, her doctor visits would not have made her a pauper! Obviously he was saying that tongue in cheek. Still, the fact that Mark, and only Mark, mentions the poor treatment this woman received from doctors is very unusual and interesting.

Some have speculated Mark, himself, must have had bad experiences with doctors. Those in our day whose medical expenses have left them bankrupt can sympathize with this poor woman. You would think this passage would be used in our day by those promoting health care reform! It certainly has a contemporary feel to it.

Be that as it may, there are bigger issues going on here. The isolation and shame this woman was experiencing come readily to mind. She was not only sick, and probably weak from all that loss of blood, but her sickness separated her from community. It was her religion's beliefs that were the cause of this isolation. More about that later.

Not only was she isolated, she most likely was feeling great shame. Why could no doctor help her? What was wrong with her? What did she do to deserve this horrible condition? Why is a woman's medical situation so much worse than a man's? She felt such great shame she could not approach Jesus directly. She had to blend in with the crowd so she could touch Jesus and then just slink away. She did not want to be noticed.

But look at what happens. She touches Jesus and the flow of blood stops. Thanks be to God. But then Jesus blows her anonymity by stopping and very publicly asking who was it who touched him?

I used to think Jesus was being so insensitive in making this woman come forward and admit it was she who touched him. Why was Jesus adding to her shame in that way? Couldn't he see she did not want to be noticed?

Then I read a different take on Jesus' actions here. Jesus was trying to complete her healing. She was physically healed when she touched him. But, she was still isolated. When Jesus calls her out he is restoring her to her community. He is publicly acknowledging her physical healing, thus healing her isolation. He was also creating a relationship with her by talking with her face to face. Our relationships, and particularly our relationship with God in Christ, play a vital role in our healing.

This passage is all about the many levels of healing we all need. Sometimes the shame some of us feel is far more debilitating than any physical discomfort. I read this week about a woman who was a survivor of incest. She said this passage in Mark was her conversion passage. She said, "Jesus was willing to empty himself-to let go of his power in such a dramatic way that he felt it draining from him-for this woman. It took an immense emptying to heal her immense shame. And he's willing to do that for me, too."

This passage is not just about healing. It is also about the power of religion to do good but also the power of religion to do bad. William Countryman, an Episcopal priest and professor, has written, "The point was and is that religion itself is good only so long as it

is an open avenue of approach to God. It becomes counterproductive or even evil when it imposes itself instead as a barrier to keep certain people-often those with less social power-away from God.”

He goes on to say if we use the gospel “in order to guard the privileges of one group or another-whites, males, heterosexuals-we are moving in exactly the opposite direction from Jesus.” Sadly, the Church, down through history has done exactly that. When we do that we miss the gifts of those we exclude.

Mark so admires this woman who was excluded because of her illness that he puts her up as an example of faith to those in his church. One of the commentators in the *Discipleship Study Bible* puts it this way. He writes: this woman’s faith “pushes her beyond tradition and law in search of Jesus’ transformative power.”

Sometimes we need to see the bigger picture. Sometimes we need see if our religion is insulating us from others. Sometimes we need to see if we are settling for simple, shallow answers to very complex questions of faith. Dealing with issues around sickness and health, untimely deaths and grief, is hard, hard work. But, like that one commentator said, sickness makes simple, shallow answers irrelevant. It forces us to dig deeper.

It is when we can give ourselves, and those we love, to God in the midst of sickness that avenues of healing become possible. Obviously not all who go to God are physically healed. But this passage opens our eyes and hearts to see healing is about a whole lot more than just the physical. It opens us to the depths of God’s saving grace. May we trust that saving, healing grace to work in our own lives and the lives of those we love. May it give us the courage to move beyond tradition or law if that be necessary. Amen