

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
First Presbyterian Church  
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Mark 5:21-43

### **“Great Is Thy Faithfulness”**

I think today’s story within a story from Mark is one of the best told in the gospels. It’s not often that we get to hear stories about women; but it’s really not all that often that we get to hear a story about girls. So as the mother of 2 young women, I was immediately intrigued.

But as I read the stories again and again, I also noted that within these two stories, there is room for much heartache. After all, the stories of the bleeding woman and the dead girl have a happy ending -- the woman is healed and the girl is brought back to life. Yet we know that in real life, this isn’t always true. People aren’t always healed and for sure, people aren’t brought back to life. Almost all of us can name some ailment, whether it’s physical, spiritual, psychological, or personal, that aches for healing but goes untreated. And so we need to be honest when reading this story and recognize that while some people are healed, many are not. The desperate woman plagued by years of hemorrhaging was healed, but many men and women are not. The synagogue leader’s daughter was brought back to life, but other children die. Not everyone who prays for a miracle gets one.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a book titled “Bread of Angels: The Problem with Miracles”. In it she writes: “The trouble with miracles is that it is hard to witness to them without wanting one of your own. Everyone one of us knows someone who is suffering. Everyone one of us knows someone who could use a miracle, but miracles are hard to come by. Not everyone who prays for one gets one, and meanwhile some get them without asking.”

“Great Is Thy Faithfulness” may be the hymn we’re reflecting on today, but let’s be honest and admit that sometimes God’s faithfulness feels a little hard to come by.

So let’s talk about this story and what we might take from it.

Like many stories in the Gospels, this one begins on the beach. Jesus and his disciples have just re-crossed the Sea of Galilee. They've hardly stepped off the boat when Jairus, a leader of the local synagogue, pushes through the crowd, falls at Jesus's feet, and begs Jesus to heal his twelve-year-old daughter who is on the verge of death. Jesus agrees. But they're interrupted by a woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years. Ironically, she has been bleeding for as long as Jairus's daughter has been alive.

Mark says the hemorrhaging woman has endured much under many physicians. Doctors keep taking her money for unsuccessful remedies, and she lives on a roller coaster of renewed hope and crushing disappointment as the specialists keep writing new prescriptions.

The Talmud describes eleven different cures for this woman's disease. One was to drink a goblet of wine containing a powder made from rubber, alum, and garden crocuses. Another was to carry the ashes of an ostrich egg in a linen bag all throughout the summer. But she didn't get better. In fact, with the doctors' help she got worse.

So is it any wonder she pushes *her* way through the crowd, stretches out her hand, and sneakily touches Jesus's cloak in the hopes of being healed? Not at all. Even though she knows she has no business polluting the crowds with her presence and is forbidden to touch other people and knows that her fingertips on Jesus's cloak will defile him, she touches him anyway. Because she's desperate.

Immediately, her bleeding stops, and she feels within her body that she is healed. At the same instant, Jesus recognizes that power has immediately gone out of *his* body, and he insists on finding out why. "Who touched my clothes?" he asks, turning to face the throngs of people behind him. Now if I can be honest, let me say that I think it's a ridiculous question; he's being jostled from all sides; anyone could have touched him. But Jesus won't budge. "Who touched my clothes?"

I had never considered before today the agony Jesus must have put Jairus through when he stopped to ask this ludicrous and wholly irrelevant

question: “Who touched my clothes?” Who cares? What a waste of time! Jairus’s daughter needs you; now is no time to stop!

But this is Jesus we’re talking about, and he loves to stop *even when* time is of the essence and he has essential work to do elsewhere. So He doesn’t allow the woman to slink away into obscurity but instead invites her to bear witness, to find her voice, and to speak publicly and confidently about her story and God’s. He gives her the space and time and listens to her truth; her whole truth. And after he does he says, “Daughter, go in peace.”

After this Jairus and Jesus proceed on to Jairus’s house. But by now Jairus has received news that his daughter has died. Ironic, don’t you think, that in the same instant one person’s hopes have soared, another’s have been dashed to pieces. One has been claimed as a daughter; while another’s daughter has been lost. Great is thy faithfulness? The people put it so clearly, “Why even trouble the teacher any further?” They asked because it was impossible for them to believe Jesus could ever bring life to a dead girl.

But Jesus will have none of that talk. So he turns to Jairus and tells him “Do not be afraid, your daughter is only sleeping”; tells the houseguests to get lost; takes Jairus and his wife to where their daughter is sleeping; takes the girl’s hands in his, and says “Talitha kum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!” And she does.

Now friends, we can read this story within a story and affirm without a doubt that God’s faithfulness is great, just like the hymn sings and go about our day. But as I said at the beginning, not every story has a happy ending. So what is it we need to hear today?

What I think we need to hear is that it’s impossible to read this story without getting the sense that Jesus really does not want to leave people in the conditions in which he finds them. Let me say that again: Jesus really does not want to leave people in the conditions in which he finds them. He could have ignored the hemorrhaging woman and gone straight to Jairus’s house, but he didn’t, because restoring a broken woman to fellowship, dignity, and humanity demands he stop. He could have ignored Jairus; after all, a 12 year old girl was hardly of much worth back then. But he didn’t, because Jesus believes all people have worth. All people are valued in God’s eyes.

Sometimes it bears reminding people that Christian communities like this one, or Christians in general are called to bring healing into troubled circumstances. That it's not about posting the Ten Commandments or dictating the Bible be taught. That it's about following Jesus's way of crossing boundaries, whether they are related to ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation and identity, politics, or any other boundary that divides our society, and advocate life giving meaning and change.

This is an important calling for us; particularly here and now in light of the fatal shooting of Linzell Pahrn. Friends, whether or not you feel the shooting was justified, no one deserves to die . . . and a community is hurting. People in our community, our neighbors, are hurting. My guess is, that police officer is hurting. Do we have the courage to advocate for ways that give life rather than take them? Again, this story within a story shows us that Jesus chooses not to leave people in the conditions in which he finds them, and he has the power to alter that condition. Do we? Can we, too, bring healing into troubled circumstances? I believe with God's help, we can and we do have that power.

I truly believe that the Bible's message is one of love – that Jesus will always err on the side of love. Now can we disagree on how to implement love – but starting with love as the foundation is the only faithful place to start.

Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, says that “if it doesn't look like love, if it doesn't look like Jesus of Nazareth, it cannot be claimed to be Christian.” *If it doesn't look like love, it isn't Christian.* Period.

And what does love look like? What looks like Jesus?

- The one whose heart melts at the cry of a desperate father looks like love. As does the one who visits the sick child and takes her limp hand in his.
- The one who risks defilement to touch the bloody and broken looks like love. And so does The one who listens for as long as it takes.
- The one who brings life to dead places looks like love. And so does The one who restores hope.

- The one who turns mourning into dancing looks like love, and so does.
- The one who renames the outcast “Daughter”, and bids her go in peace.

So, what is asleep in us that Jesus needs to awaken? What do we have to push through in order to grab hold of God’s boundless compassion? What stands in our way of healing?

For you see, Just like Jesus commanded the dying girl to stand up, Jesus commands all of us to stand up; to stand up to old prejudices, to exclusionary practices, to self-righteousness, to judgment and to criticism and to say enough.

TALitha koom, little girl stand up. And so she does. And so are we called to help others stand, too.

So as the great hymn sings, let us join in manifold witness to God’s great faithfulness, mercy and love.

Amen.

Let us pray:

Gracious God,

Thank you for this day.

Thank you for your presence in our lives.

Thank you for this day of worship and focus on you.

Thank you for your great faithfulness.

Grant your presence and your peace to all in need of your grace and healing. We pray for all who are ill in body, mind or spirit...for those who are poor, or hungry, or oppressed...for those who feel no joy in the passing of each day...and for all who have been hurt or excluded from life because they have been deemed unclean.

Be with all of these, O God, and pour out the blessing of your Spirit upon them, and bring them the peace of knowing your great faithfulness. May

we be the hands and feet of Christ in the world. May we see the face of Christ in everyone we meet, and may we embrace the world with your peace, your justice, and your love.

Amen.

Sources:

Commentaries on Mark 5:21-43 from Working Preacher.

Debie Thomas, [www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net)