

July 1, 2018
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Heidi Rodrick-Schnaath

This week there's been a meme going around on Facebook. Over a period of ten days you post a photo from a favorite film, without any explanation and of course, you're supposed to tag ten of your friends.

At first it seemed like a fairly simple thing to do, but by day three I felt a bit stuck. There was pressure to pick something novel or something nobody else had chosen. And how could I limit it to just ten? I love movies! After reminding myself that this was not that big a deal, I tried to think of a movie that I would happily watch again and again. Not everyone does that, but there are some stories that I will watch every year and books I reread like clockwork.

It may be the plotline or the dialog or the sheer loveliness of the thing – but I will watch some films, again and again and again. What's so great is that sometimes, even if you've watched the movie or read the book a dozen times or more, you'll discover something new. For me, the Bible works the same way. I think I understand the story, the plot, the characters and the dialog, when suddenly something new will strike me and I will wonder how I never saw it that way before.

Today's gospel is one of those stories. I can remember hearing this story as a girl and thinking how wonderful it was that Jesus was concerned about Jairus' daughter. The man was so sad about his little girl dying, and Jesus wanted to help her. It seemed like a family story. A children's story. What I didn't understand at the time was the fact that Jesus was stepping way outside of appropriate behavior to do the things that he did for that little girl. First of all, she was a girl. And in that time and place, girls weren't all that important. They were chattel and so, like their mothers before them, they were their father's personal property until they were married. That doesn't mean that parents didn't love their children, but childhood was viewed very differently.

The second thing about this story is that she was dying and then she appeared to be dead. Touching her, taking her by the hand was a huge mistake. Touching a dead person made you ritually unclean. It just wasn't done.

Finally, trusting that Jairus was a good guy? He was a synagogue leader, which made him an insider and religious insiders weren't always Jesus' biggest fans.

As a kid I just thought this was a nice story about Jesus taking care of a young girl and her Dad who loved her, but there is so much more going on. As a seminary student, I caught on to those details pretty quickly, but there were other things about this story that started to unfold for me.

The story of Jairus and his daughter is woven together with the story of a woman who had been bleeding for 12 years. She had been ritually unclean for as many years as Jairus' daughter had been alive. New Testament scholar Mark Vitalis Hoffman says that "English translations attempting to provide a clear and understandable story, obscure the dramatic way the scene is described. In a more literal rendering, you should hear the string of participles that build up, finally culminating in the woman's action. [So this is Mark's translation.]

*"And a woman--having been bleeding for twelve years,
and having suffered greatly from many physicians,
and having spent all she had,
and having benefited not one bit
but rather having gone from bad to worse,
having heard about Jesus,
having come in the crowd from behind-
-touched his cloak."*

Jesus stops and makes a scene,

And the disciples get testy with Jesus and his somewhat impossible request that they figure out who touched him! There is a franticness to the whole interaction.

And what they don't tell you about all of this when you're a kid, is that basically she has been having her period for twelve years. I didn't catch that as a child. I just imagined she was bleeding from an unhealed wound. Where that wound was – I wasn't sure. This story includes some icky female stuff that we try not to talk about, but which is all over the Bible. Not because they wanted to talk about it in Jesus' time either. Women who were menstruating were not allowed to participate in family or community life until it had passed. Women who gave birth also had to sit things out for a while. And if you had a girl it was twice as long as if you had a boy.

As a young woman I wondered how this she dealt with it all? Her family and intimate friends would have known. Did they insist on keeping their distance for 12 long years? She'd spent all her money on doctors who did her no good. She had to have been in a nearly constant state of anxiety. Did she sneak in and out of places, hoping that anybody who knew who she was and knew what she was living with would keep it to themselves? Or did they call out "unclean" when they saw her coming – warning everyone to keep a wide berth? Her life was awful.

Yet, she believes that Jesus can help her and he does. The story has been told for centuries-how the Son of God, the Savior of the whole world – healed a woman that everyone else was avoiding as best they could. She wasn't anyone special or important. Jairus gets named in the story because he was important. So do the three disciples but she wasn't anyone to be noticed. We don't even know her name and yet Jesus noticed her. And we remember her – for her faithfulness. For her willingness to take a risk and to reach out and touch Jesus.

As a 25 year old seminarian, I liked this story for the spunk of that woman and for the crazy interplay between Jesus and the disciples.

As a 35 year old pastor I liked the story for what it had to say about healing versus wholeness. There was a woman in my congregation who had been fighting breast cancer for a long time. Laurie was one of the most daring Christians I have ever met. She was so bold in her belief that God would take care of her no matter what. She asked if we would do a bible study on healing – and we did. She and I led it together. We studied this story and talked about the fact that Jesus first tells the woman that she has been saved and then at the end, he says her illness has been cured. Two different things. Laurie wanted both. She wanted to be well and she wanted to be healed. She asked if we could have a healing service. And we did.

There were about fifty people who came. At least half of them were Laurie's friends and family. When the time came for her to come forward for prayer, the laying on of hands and anointing with oil – about a dozen people came up with her, including her husband Ken and her mom. We all laid hands on Laurie and we prayed.

She didn't get healed.

We had the chance to have more than one service – but Laurie didn't get better. Her cancer continued to metastasize and she fought it as hard as she could for as long as she could, but she wasn't healed.

And yet, she said she felt better for the prayers. She felt more whole. More connected to God. More connected to her community. Something had happened and she felt different.

More than twenty years later, I read this section of Mark and it nearly breaks my heart. I know women and men who would like so much to just grab on to the hem of Jesus' robe or anything else they might get their hands on so that they could be made well and made whole. They have prayed with all the

ferocity and hope they can manage and they have not been alone in their prayers. Others have fervently prayed with them and for them, but the miracle – the instantaneous cure – never happens.

And I hear in my head “Ask and it shall be given. Knock and the door shall be opened.” I am sure that they have asked and that we have knocked, but the cancer persists. And it makes me angry. What did that woman do that day that doesn’t happen all over the world every day of the week?

Come by here, Lord. Someone’s crying.

Come by here! Lord, Someone’s praying.

Come by here, Jesus. That’s what Jairus asked.

I know parents who have pleaded so hard for their child to wake up - to come back to them – and the answer to their prayers was not what they hoped for either. So this week, I really wanted to skip these stories altogether and pick something different. I started my weekly studying but with each new thing I read, I wondered if I was the only preacher around that wasn’t happy to be dealing with Mark, chapter 5. Then I read again, what my friend Mark Vitalis Hoffman said about the gospel for today.

So since we are not the woman or the girl. Since Jesus isn’t here to literally take us by the hand – where is the good news in the gospel today? Other than telling the truth, how are you going to preach this text?

And he had a couple of ideas. But he ended with this- *In any case, as Jesus says at the end, "Give them something to eat." Or at least something to chew on.*

So here are a few things to chew on this week.

The magical miracles that Jesus performs in Mark 5 are not typical of what Jesus does in the Bible. There aren’t a lot of stories about him raising people from the dead and this is the only story where someone reaches out to touch Jesus or his clothing and gets instantly healed.

These miracles in these stories are atypical and unusual. What is not unusual about this text is the way that Jesus responds to people. He cares about them and he cares deeply.

I don’t think he was angry or confused when the woman touched him- when he asked “Who touched me?” I think he was asking her to meet him face to face. He wanted to be in relationship. He calls her “daughter” – can you imagine? And he commends her for her faithfulness. She is changed not just by the miracle that happens, but by her interaction with Jesus who shows her love and compassion.

The Greek word that Mark uses to describe her quest for healing literally means to be rescued- rescued from impending destruction. And reaching out to Jesus does just that. But she is saved in more than one way. Her life is changed in more than one way because she knows Jesus.

Here’s another thing, Jesus never promised that we would have health all the time. He never said that if we had faith, nothing bad would ever happen to us. He didn’t tell us that if we prayed we would have all our dreams fulfilled. That’s not a part of the gospel but he does promise some other really remarkable things, like.

"Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy."

"If you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will forgive you."

He tells the thief dying on the cross - "Today you will be with me in paradise."

And he promises that he will always be with us. Until the end of the age. Until the end of time.

He also promises us that when we come to his table to eat and drink, we will receive the forgiveness of our sins, salvation and life everlasting. If that’s not a miracle than I don’t know what is. A tiny piece of bread and a small sip of wine- together with the promise of Christ – are a sign of Jesus promising to be with us and in us and for us.

That’s a life changing miracle!

Here’s another thing. When Jesus says that the girl isn’t really dead, she’s just sleeping, I really wonder what was going on. Jairus’ friends have a good laugh because they think he’s a bit mad. They

know she's dead, they've done all the things that would prove she was dead and maybe she was. Her body that is, but we are not our bodies. What is essential about you- all the wonderful things that make you the particular person that you are – aren't your body. So perhaps her body was dead – but her spirit was alive. To Jesus, she was still very much a part of the kingdom of God.

I don't know why he chose to raise that girl and not another, but before he did, he said to his disciples one more time. "Do not be afraid, but believe." Perhaps the miracle was for them- those three- Peter and James and John. Maybe they needed to see the power of God in that moment, so that when things got really tough in the months and years ahead they would remember that Jesus was more powerful than anything in all creation, including death.

And one last thing. When the young girl gets up, Jesus says they should get her something to eat. It's such a practical request. *She needs to be fed. Take care of her.*

Jesus notices things. He notices people that others ignore. He notices people on the edges. People that other people try to forget and he lets them know that all the good news, all the promises God ever made are for them as much as for anyone else. And he enters into relationship with those people. So, in our praying, in our requests for healing, we may not get what we ask for. We may not get what we think we need, but we do always get this – the promise that God is with us. The promise that God knows us and knows us completely and there is nothing that can ever separate us from the love of God. Nothing. Not death. Not cancer. Not tragedy. Not anything.

Nothing will ever separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Nothing.