

Our Stories are Connected – a communion meditation
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Mark 5:21-43

What must her life have been like? Twelve years sick. Destitute from medical bills, excluded from her religious community, left to fend for herself, utterly alone. How much energy must it have taken each morning to lift her fatigued, anemic body up from her sleeping mat? What efforts it must have taken for her to look for food, to search (yet again) for a cure. To wash her clothes. Always, to wash her clothes.

And I wonder if she prayed. Were she and God even on speaking terms? And I wonder if in her forays into the community, did anyone ever notice her, or did they all turn away when they saw her coming?

One day, Mark tells us, Jesus came to town. She went to see him. Maybe at first, she hovered around the edge of the crowd in nervous anticipation. But eventually, something awakened inside her and propelled her into the crowd, to reach out, to touch Jesus' cloak. With the touch, finally, came the healing she'd been longing for.

Jesus, aware that power had gone out from him, asked who had taken it and been healed. The disciples noted the large number of people around him. What kind of question was that? Maybe Jesus wasn't really asking for information, I have to think he would have known who touched him. Maybe his words were less investigation and more like an invitation - an invitation to the woman to testify, to tell her story, to witness to her own healing, and to her own plucky determination to obtain that healing.

Today's story of the hemorrhaging woman is what some would call the "meat" of a "Markan sandwich." The author of Mark's Gospel quite fond of starting to tell one story, interrupting it with a second story, then concluding the first story. The stories are meant to be read together, because they inform each other. Like fabric, made of threads, the point is made stronger when told this way.

I read once that before the scientific age parents did not allow themselves to get too emotionally attached to their children. In the days before

vaccinations, hospitals, and maternal/prenatal care, so many of them died young. In Jesus' time, as many as 60 percent of the children who survived childbirth, died by their mid-teens.

The gift of a child must have seemed too precarious to invest in wholeheartedly, and yet, this man couldn't bear to lose his little girl. Perhaps it's desperation, not faith, that drives him to Jesus, and his moment of faith comes a little while later, when the news of his daughter's death reaches him. By going to this itinerant preacher-healer who was already in trouble with the authorities (authorities like him, in fact, his colleagues and friends), he risks being ridiculed. Even worse, he risks missing the last few precious moments of his daughter's life.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes Jesus' response to the desperate father as preaching the "shortest sermon of his career: 'Do not fear,' he says to the grief-besotted man, 'only believe.'" Taylor says this sermon was not just for Jairus' benefit, and not just for the early church Mark addressed, but for *"all of us who suffer from the human condition, who are up against things we cannot control."*

We wonder what's going on in the minds of those in the story: the synagogue leader, both worried and hurried; Jesus, who might have had other plans but has dropped everything and gone with the father in distress; the disciples, struggling as usual just to keep up; and the crowd, watching all of this, all of them hoping for something, whether it's just for a good show or something much greater, something that might change their whole lives.

Into the midst of all of this comes the silent, brave, suffering woman, without the religious leader's power or privilege, simply hoping for one healing touch.

Faithfulness or fear, desperation or hope: there's no alternative for either one of these people, and they do whatever they have to do, whatever it takes, for the sake of healing and new life.

They are all connected. Their stories depend on each other. The unnamed woman who has been suffering for 12 years – the entire length of time of Jairus' 12 year old unnamed daughter's life. Both, in very different ways, express incredible faith. Both fall at Jesus' feet. Both experience God's salvation, God's healing, through Jesus. The woman and the little girl were

both unclean (because of bleeding or because of death), and in both cases, Jesus blows past the religious rules, and breaks the law to help them. In doing so, Jesus calls them both 'daughter'. Their healing, their salvation, is not a competition. It is not at odds. It is inextricably connected. And so is ours.

I wonder how this story would be told today? Perhaps instead of a synagogue leader, Mark would write about the father of a teen runaway, desperately begging God to save his little daughter's life from human traffickers. Perhaps instead of a bleeding woman, Jesus would be interrupted by a woman with a chronic pain condition, whose visits to the doctor cost her everything yet somehow made her situation worse, who has been sick for so long and in such constant need that those around her have stopped calling or checking in. Their stories are connected.

Or perhaps Mark would write about a military wife, pleading at Jesus feet for her spouse to come home safely, and for his psychological and cognitive wounds to heal. Anxiously clinging to Jesus and rightly demanding his full attention. Mark might interrupt her story with one about a homeless veteran, pushing her way through the crowds that do not want her there, that consider her unclean. Forcing her way through for just a slight touch. Their stories are connected.

Lilla Watson, an Indigenous Australian elder, artist & activist, writes *"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."* The stories in Mark's gospel need each other.

Our stories are connected too. As different as we are, as varied are the ways we come to Jesus, whether with dignity or without, with privilege or without, we all come to Christ in our desperation, and we all fall at his feet. Jesus looks into the face of each one of you, and everyone who is so different than you, and calls you all daughter, son, beloved child.

In Luke 4:18, Jesus quotes Isaiah to describe the purpose of his ministry when he says, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberation to the captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free."* Sometimes when our world seems so bitterly divided, it can start to feel like my healing and your healing are at odds, like your liberation is an interruption of mine. But in our

stories today, Jesus shows us that as different as we are, our salvation is inextricably bound together.

May we look around at all God's children, all the world's desperation, all the orthodox and unorthodox ways people are reaching out for help; and recognize that our stories and our journeys are tied together. May we, like Jesus, speak words of peace, empathy and healing. May we, like Jesus, lift each other up. Amen.