

Known and Named

The merging of these two healing stories with current events formed the basis of my reading of the passage from Mark's gospel. Names—especially nicknames or stereotypes—as applied to individuals can be powerful. These are things that are given by others to describe something about us—and they can be pretty hard to shake. Whether the ones given to us are accurate or not, whether we like them or not, whether they are flattering or not, these descriptors hung on us have significant power. Why? Because naming one reality about us—whether true or not—this naming tends to reduce all of who we are to that one dimension. Early in the Harry Potter novel series by J.K. Rowling, he was called “the boy who lived”. When his parents were killed by the dark wizard Voldemort, he was struck by a killing curse which should have killed him but didn't. He lived—and so that became his name. Names—whether nicknames or some other descriptor—are not only powerful, but convenient because they work to summarize a lot of things into one element. But in their convenience they are also dangerous because they reduce us or others—they reduce people and strip us and others of their individuality and uniqueness and label us according to what someone else sees. I thought of this pop culture character and the power of names which are being used carelessly in public conversations—names which reduce people to one dimension—names whose accuracy we don't challenge but accept without considering that one dimensional summation nature because it is convenient for us to label others. Last week Jesus took the disciples on a boat ride to the other side. They encountered a storm on the way, and witnessed the power of Jesus calming the wind and the sea. Their stay on that other side was brief. In the passage between that text and today's Jesus heals a man possessed by so many demons he was simply called “Legion”. Again, there is the power of names, the man's own identity was lost and he was known only by the demons which possessed him. At the conclusion of this healing, Jesus is not welcomed by the villagers who lived there so our passage begins “when Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side.”

As has become routine when Jesus is in the area near the Sea of Galilee a great crowd gathers around him. His fame and reputation have spread so his return is greeted by a crowd. Among this particular crowd is a man named Jairus, who is a leader of the local synagogue. Jairus is in the crowd for a purpose—he is seeking to obtain a healing for his daughter. Considering the hostility toward Jesus from the religious leaders who came down from Jerusalem, the identity of Jairus is interesting. He is described as a leader of the local synagogue, a person of authority in the Jewish community. But in seeking out Jesus, Jairus is recognizing that Jesus possesses a higher authority. Jairus approaches Jesus, falls at his feet and begs 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.” Jairus has authority in the law, but here gives a confession of faith in Jesus' authority over life. Jesus' response it to go with him and the crowd also follows along. This crowd is described as pressing in upon him—which resembles the description of the crowd which earlier led to Jesus teaching from a boat along the shore. At the point we have the insertion of another story—the story of the unnamed woman. The narrative moves from a wealthy, powerful man who wants Jesus to heal his daughter to the healing of a destitute woman—a woman who doesn't at this point have a name at all. She is nothing—according to the description—just a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. The introduction of this woman within the

narrative when read is a literal translation of the Greek is a much more powerful statement indicating her desperation—it is a string of participles that build up, until finally culminating in the woman's action. "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."

The woman in the crowd would be considered unclean and undeserving of aid—She would have been judged as unworthy of healing by the futility of her expended resources and the duration of the disease that renders her permanently unclean. She—and the crowd around Jesus would have thought her healing would be a waste of the Master's time and his power. And in fact, the very way she approaches—sneaking up on him from behind under cover of the crowd to be healed is in itself a grounds for her disqualification of healing. Yet she is healed. And Jesus doesn't let the moment pass. He notices—and the journey to Jairus' daughter's aid is halted. Jesus asks "Who touched my clothes?" The disciples, looking around at the crowd thought that was a strange question. "You see the crowd pressing in on you, how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" But Jesus knew someone had sought healing from him and received it, so he continued to look at the crowd. The woman, who had felt her body be healed, came to him. She came in fear and trembling and fell down before him and explained her situation and what she had done. In Jesus' response, she is named: "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." Although unnamed as she was introduced in the narrative, she is now known as family. Just as this blessing has been given and Jesus prepares to continue to the aid of the first named daughter, we read "some people came from the leader's house to say to Jairus, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" Jairus either doesn't respond or his response is not significant enough to be recorded because when Jesus "overhearing what they said, Jesus says to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." It seems implicit that Jesus is telling Jairus to have faith that the healing he sought is still possible, but the narrative doesn't make that explicit in words. But Jesus' actions as always in Mark speak louder than words. Jesus continues on to the home of Jairus after dismissing the crowd and only allowing his closest disciples to come with him. When they arrive at Jairus' home, Jesus sees a "commotion, people are weeping and wailing loudly." Jesus enters the home and challenges the people, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." The gathered friends and family of the girl laugh at Jesus. Jesus then makes them all go outside except for the parents and his disciples as he goes to where the child was and takes her hand. Since she has been declared dead, she is now unclean by Jewish traditions. This doesn't even give Jesus pause—he calls her little girl and tells her to get up--and she does and begins to walk about. The parents and evidently the disciples were both overcome with amazement because they are the only "everybody" present. After telling the parents to feed their daughter, in typical Markan fashion, they were told no one else should be told. The woman had suffered for twelve years, the young girl was twelve years old. The woman was destitute and a social outcast, the young girl was a loved member of an important family. Jesus made no difference in his care for them. They were both known to him and named by him as family. Jesus didn't do triage—setting one above the other in urgency—he had no time for that. Jesus saw each one as valuable—both are healed—the young and the old, the

one whose life was full of hope and the one who had lost all hope and became desperate. This narrative with its inclusion of one story within another tells us that there is enough power, compassion and grace to go around so that no one needs be written off. We just cannot ourselves determine for whom Jesus should prioritize his attention. We ourselves should understand that all are valuable in the sight of our Lord, even those we see as destitute, outcast and unclean, unworthy. Christ who died, died for all that are in God's family. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.