

A Narrative of Two Healings

The text from Mark we have before us today has Jesus and the disciples back on the Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee. For some reason this year the lectionary has skipped over the events which took place on the “other side”—after learning of that dangerous storm threatened journey and the revelation of the extent of Jesus’ power, we skip over the reason Jesus made that trip into a region foreign to his culture and traditions known as the land of the Gerasenes. While there Jesus actually performed another healing—the healing of a man possessed by so many demons he was called simply “Legion”. This healing has enhanced Jesus’ reputation among the people and he is now greeted by a crowd as his fame and reputation have spread. This despite Jesus’ continued urging with the gospel of Mark for people to tell “no one”. This crowding of people around Jesus presents him with at least two problems; both of which are at play in the narrative before us this morning. The crowds themselves led him to teach from a boat before making the journey across the sea to avoid being crushed by the crowd. The second issue present is the one of uncleanness—both of the literal and the ritual type of close contact with all these people who have come seeking to be healed. Within these two narratives there are two ways to examine the scene: what are the differences in the conditions of the healings and what are the similarities. The differences are pretty obvious: Mark first tells us of one of the leaders of the synagogue, a man named Jarius who comes to Jesus to beg him to come and heal his daughter who is deathly ill. This individual is named. He is socially and religiously prominent in the community. He openly comes to Jesus and makes his request. Jesus begins to go with him. Next, Mark tells us of a healing that occurs without a formal request even being made. This healing occurs by an unnamed person in the crowd sneaking a touch; a person who is never given a name and thus although healed has no political or social standing in the community. Jesus has started to go with this important person to the aid of his deathly ill daughter when he suddenly stops...he stops because he felt someone touch him in a specific way. He turned and asked the crowd, “Who touched my clothes?” The disciples thought this was a strange question because with all the people surrounding him, they felt he was being touched by many and basically said that to him. But Jesus knew this touch was different. This touch was by a woman who had come and joined the crowd because she had heard of his healing touch and thought if she could just touch his clothes she would be made well. This was after twelve years of suffering from hemorrhages—which in her community made her unclean and isolated from her community. She had spent all her resources seeking a cure, only to grow worse, not better. Yet, hearing of this man Jesus and his healing touch, she sought to come and touch his clothes and received healing. The thing which we may not appreciate in this story is that the woman should not have been present in the crowd—so when the narrative says that the woman came forward knowing what had happened to her that she came in fear and trembling—that was probably very literally fear. By being in that crowd—she as an unclean person coming into contact will all those other people had made them ritually unclean. Yet when Jesus asked her to tell him the whole truth, she did. She confessed that she had had the condition of bleeding for twelve years. Before the crowd could then judge her for her transgressions...Jesus then called her “Daughter” and pronounced a benediction upon her, telling her to go in peace and granting her restoration to her community. In many ways this was much more than a simple healing. At this point it seems Jesus is ready to start again on his

interrupted trip with Jairus who has come requesting his help. In our description of Jairus we noted that he was an important person in the community. The narrative tells us that he approached Jesus himself—he did not send servants, although what happens now tells us that he easily could have. As a leader of the synagogue it would have been unexpected that he would show this vulnerability publically as he has when he begged Jesus to aid him. Jesus and his teaching were drawing large crowds, but he was not widely accepted or given approval by all of the Jewish leaders. Normally, it would be expected that Jairus would have sent an emissary to Jesus, but his love for his daughter has made him vulnerable. Jairus, although connected to his community and named is also vulnerable just as the unnamed woman who has been isolated and made vulnerable by her disease. Jesus has healed and restored her by his touch, now it seems that that has prevented Jairus' daughter's healing as Jairus' servants arrive with news of her death. Jesus, overhearing the message, tells Jairus, "Do not fear, only believe." He then takes only four of his closest disciples and continues to go to Jairus' home. When they arrive they encounter a house of mourning. Jesus tells them they should not mourn for the child is only sleeping. They mourners laugh at him, but he puts all of them except the parents and his disciples outside. Again, in this story we find one of those details Mark likes to include—this little girl was twelve years old. This is significant as it is the age which often signals the beginning of menstruation, of the beginning of the ability to bear life, of adulthood. Yet, because of this disease, she may never see it. She, too, is utterly vulnerable, though she is in no position to be able to do anything about it. She had been living as long as the woman whom Jesus had just healed had been hemorrhaging. We are very familiar with the ending of this scene. Jesus goes and takes the hand of the little girl and says to her: "Little girl, get up!" And in the true Markan style: "Immediately the girl got up and began to walk about." The passage ends with amazement being expressed by everyone. In this "sandwich" narrative of Mark, there have been three characters presented—three who have shown extreme states of vulnerability: the important named figure of the synagogue leader, Jairus; the desperate hemorrhaging unnamed woman in the crowd; the dying young daughter of Jairus who also remains unnamed. Only one of these individuals has status, and therefore possibly power—yet it gains him no influence. He requests aid, and does receive it, although it is not for himself. Two of these individuals need healing and both receive it. For the woman who remains unnamed, it means restoration to her community which is life affirming; even if she has lived with the condition for twelve years, these years have been ones of pain and suffering physically as well as emotionally due to the rejection and isolations that the state of being named "unclean" and therefore rejected by all has caused. For the young girl, who also remains unnamed, she literally is restored to life and all that promises for a future. She is restored to family and community, to the possibility of bearing life herself, even though she herself was so vulnerable she was not even able to request aid. These three characters Jesus touches. These three characters Jesus answers their vulnerability and heals their needs, restoring them. The comments made by Jesus about these interactions are ones about faith and belief. He tells the hemorrhaging woman: "Daughter, your faith has made you well." He tells Jairus as they continue on to his home, "Do not fear, only believe." These statements are there, but they have been used in ways that have been hurtful and harmful by some implying that when cures do not happen faith has been lacking. In order to prevent this type of mis-use of these statements we should look at the context for Jesus' healing in scriptures. The whole purpose

for these miracles in his ministry were not meant for show, they were not meant to be a demonstration of power—remember he sent everyone except the parents and his disciples out of the little girl’s room. These healing acts were not meant to convince skeptics as they were done for people who came to him seeking help. They were not done to seek notoriety—as he often requested they not be revealed. They were acts of compassion in response to human need—to the vulnerability of the people who came to him. But of course, they were also more than that as they were clear demonstrations of the new life of God’s kingdom. What Jesus was asking people to believe in was the nearness of the reign of God, that Jesus and his teachings were showing how God was working to make that reign, that new life possible for them. In our present day culture we do not like to admit to being vulnerable, we do not like to ask for help and we often show disdain and disrespect those who are obviously vulnerable. We treat them just as the Jewish society did those they declared “unclean”, and separate them, isolate them using whatever labels are popular at the moment. They are often like the “untouchables” in the Hindu culture of India. We may not have such a blatant nomenclature in the United States, but the barriers and classes, though unnamed exist. These narratives have several lessons for us if we can be open to them. We can use them to look at our society in terms of the ways we name and create “class” distinctions and make some people vulnerable, isolating them and causing them pain and suffering by that isolation. We can then seek ways to reach out and touch them, offering the life affirming inclusion and help needed. On a personal level, we can also look at the various ways that people are vulnerable and recognize that at some point in our lives we all may be in that condition. That there are times in our lives when things happen that press us to our limits and even beyond. When that happens, we have a choice. We can pull the covers over our heads, isolate ourselves, and try to escape from it all. Or we can embrace what we are feeling and move forward in faith that God has a future for us, a future that may seem dark at the moment but one which God will walk with us as we go forward to meet it. Just because we experience devastating loss doesn’t mean our lives are over. If we can only believe and open our hearts to see new possibilities, God can and will heal and restore us. That may just be the greatest miracle of all. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.