

## **Sermon: Hearing**

Year B, Proper 8

[Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15, 2:23-24; Psalm 30; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43](#)

Offered June 28, 2015 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

Today's reading from Mark is a long one and you guys did great with it. But it's one of those stories that's hard to understand if you don't visualize it with all the people. Let's say the Sea of Galilee is over here. We're on the Jewish side of the lake. We've heard all sorts of amazing things about this teacher from Nazareth. He's been over on the gentile side of the lake and he's been healing people over there, people who were really ill and possessed by demons. Major league healing. He healed a bunch of people on our side of the lake too earlier in the week, up the coast a bit. We're in a reasonably small town, so what do you think happens once word gets around that the healer is headed into our town and will be arriving by boat?

We all come to see him. Now this is a small detail, but it keeps coming up. If we all come to see him and he's coming in a boat, basically we all end up standing on the shore. It's probably a gravel beach, where the boats always pull up. We're all facing the same way. Maybe initially we're kind of spread out, but as the boat comes closer and more and more people show up, we get kind of packed together.

You can picture this. Like people along a parade route, or when there's a presidential candidate in town. Some of the most intense mobs I've been in like this were near the refreshment tables at a college graduation.

Now imagine that you're Jairus. For many of you, it's not hard. He's a dad with a sick little girl at home. Technically, at twelve years old, they would have considered her ready to be married, but I have yet to meet a dad who didn't think his daughter was his little girl even if she's a grandmother in her own right. Jairus is one of the leaders of the synagogue in that community so he's privileged, powerful, accepted, male.<sup>1</sup> He's an important guy, but right now, it doesn't matter. His daughter is dying and the man he hopes can save her is on the other side of the crowd from him. They're all standing with their backs to him so they don't get out of his way until he's past them. He has to slide and wiggle and scootch and push his way forward. He has to jam his way to the front of the crowd and then has to create enough room in front of Jesus to fall to his knees and beg repeatedly for Jesus to come and lay his hands on her. (Mark 5:23)

Jesus agrees. Jairus gets up off his knees and turns around and now has the entire mob in front of him. They can see him now, but they're still jammed in together. He starts out towards his house with Jesus and the disciples following him. But so is the whole mob. And since they're all locals, they all know where Jairus' house is. So now it's like trying to walk through a crowded lobby. You may know where you're going, but once everyone turns around Jairus has the same problem he had before. He can't move fast enough because all the people are in his way.<sup>2</sup> With a 12 year old daughter, Jairus has to be in his 30s, so he's probably plenty strong

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark Edington, "Proper 8, Theological Perspective, Mark 5:21-43" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 190.

<sup>2</sup> Richard W. Swanson, "Moving Bodies and Translating Scripture: Interpretation and Incarnation." *Word & World* 31, no. 3 (2011): 273.

enough to shift people out of his way. It's just that there are so many people and his daughter is so sick.

Then all of a sudden Jesus comes to a halt. He wants to know who touched his clothes. (Mark 5:30) You have to imagine Jairus hearing the question and thinking, "who hasn't touched your clothes today, Teacher?" But Jairus turns around to realize that he's gotten well ahead of Jesus, and walks back. There, on her knees, is a woman he knows perfectly well. She's been sick as long as his daughter's been alive, come to think of it. Instead of saying something like, "I touched your clothes," she's telling him the whole truth, the whole backstory that brought them to this moment.<sup>3</sup> Jesus listens and then says this wonderful thing to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace." (Mark 5:34) Jairus has to feel relieved. Jesus can heal people of really serious diseases; it wasn't just town gossip blowing things out of proportion. Jairus has the right guy.

And yet even as Jesus is saying that, in his other ear, Jairus hears "Your daughter is dead."<sup>4</sup>

Jairus is right back to where we were in last week's sermon. Given that bad things happen to good people, why remain righteous? Why remain in right relationship with God, God's creation and each other? Out of the depths of a father's soul, the whys come raging up. Why did his daughter have to die and this woman be healed? Why did Jesus have to stop and hear this story he could have heard at any time? Why heal this woman now? She had been sick for 12 years – a few more hours wouldn't have mattered to her and it was the difference between life and death for his daughter. If Jesus was so powerful, why couldn't he have made a path through all these people who just wanted to rubberneck at Jairus' daughter's death bed?

That moment, when the story Jairus most wants to hear comes in one ear and the story he never wants to hear comes in the other, has to be why Mark included this healing story in his gospel. We've heard the whole story. The little girl gets up and gets a snack. Happy ending. Hooray. Every parent should have a happy ending. But not every parent gets one. Let's say you're Jairus and your daughter is brought back from the dead because Jesus laid his hands on her. Of course you believe in Jesus and anything he says. He brought a miracle to your house. But that can't be why Mark told the story. Because if the only way we're going to believe in Jesus and follow him is if he delivers a miracle to our doorstep, we will have missed Jesus' Good News.

Another obvious reading of this story says that if you have enough faith in Jesus, your faith will keep your children from harm. There are plenty of preachers who will interpret this story that way. But we all know people of profound faith who have lost children. We humans are ill-equipped to judge another's faith. Indeed, we are ill-equipped to judge our own.

That's the point that Mark is making with the story of the hemorrhaging woman. As you read the Gospel of Mark, look for stories like this one, where one story is tucked inside another. The story that is the middle of the sandwich explains the outer story.

Who is the woman at the heart of the sandwich? She has been ill for a long time, in an age when persistent illness made you a social outcast. In a society where it took the efforts of the entire community to keep everyone alive, a society that the Romans and their taxes were putting under increasing stress, to be an outcast, to be ritually unclean, is a long, slow death sentence. She had

---

<sup>3</sup> Gail R. O'Day, "Hope beyond Brokenness: A Markan Reflection on the Gift of Life." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 15, no. 3(1988): 248.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley D. Walters, "All is Well." *Calvin Theological Journal* 47, no. 2 (2012): 205.

obviously had means at one point, but she had spent everything she had on medical bills. (Mark 5:26) In many ways, she's the very opposite of Jairus: poor, powerless, an outcast, physically frail, a woman.<sup>5</sup>

This nobody is healed first. Mark wants to be sure that we notice that in the Kingdom of God, the marginalized and vulnerable are taken care of ahead of the powerful.<sup>6</sup> Everyone is taken care of, but Jesus starts with those who have the least influence.

The woman is like Jairus in that she has faith in Jesus. She may only confess it privately, instead of standing in front of the whole town at the beach landing and proclaiming it, but she believes. Like him she believes so deeply that she too has fought her way through the crowd. Think of trying to catch up to someone as you leave a ball game or in an airport. Everyone is headed the same way and not really looking around them. For Jairus, that meant he couldn't lead Jesus to his house quickly enough. For the woman, it means she has to bob and weave just to get close enough to Jesus to touch the fringes of his cloak. It works, she feels it in her body and she slips away, trying to get out of the crowd who don't want her anywhere near them because she is unclean.

Jesus calls her back. She kneels down and tells him the whole truth. (Mark 5:33) Her body may have changed in the moment that she touched his cloak, but it is in bringing her whole truth to Jesus that she is made well. Her willingness to bring her whole self to Jesus, unclean, poor, powerless, full of fear and trembling (Mark 5:33) is an amazing testimony to her faith. Jesus calls her "daughter" (Mark 5:34) and sends her on her way, now fully healed in both body and spirit.

That is the moment when Jairus has to make his decision. He has just seen this neighbor woman healed. But her healing has stolen precious minutes in which his own daughter's life has slipped away. Given that bad things happen to good people, why remain in right relationship with God? Why continue to believe? When the woman touched Jesus' cloak and tried to slip away, she thought herself healed. She was wrong. It was not until she came into full and personal relationship with Jesus that she was made well. Her faith was so great that she risked just about everything to touch his cloak, but anonymous contact with Jesus' power is not enough. It had to be personal.<sup>7</sup>

Jairus had gone down to meet the boat that was bringing the best healer in the area to his town. He had asked that healer cure his daughter. But now his daughter is dead. There is no more need for a healer. Jesus urges Jairus "not to fear, only believe." (Mark 5:36) Jairus can no longer cast Jesus in a role that other people could play. Now Jairus has to begin a personal relationship with Jesus. Jairus' faith which has gotten him to this point has to change, has to become personal. Like the woman, like all of us, Jairus may not be the best judge of his own faith.

This is a miracle story that Mark is telling, indeed there are two healing miracles in it. But we may not notice another miracle hidden in plain sight. The crowd which has been so in the way for the entire story melts away, so that it is only Jesus and Jairus and three of the disciples who arrive at Jairus' house.

---

<sup>5</sup> Edington, 190.

<sup>6</sup> Edington, 190.

<sup>7</sup> Donald H. Bromley, "The Healing of the Hemorrhaging Woman: Miracle or Magic?". *Proceedings (Grand Rapids, Mich.)*, 25 (2005): 19.

We want Jairus' miracle of holding onto our faith and seeing our daughter raised from the dead, walking about, needing to be fed. We can imagine how that would feel, or we can imagine that we can't imagine how it would feel, it would feel so wonderful.

We want it, but we may not get it. But the story itself urges us to look at all things Jesus assures us of that don't require miracles. We are assured of the resurrection, that death is not the end. But we may have to pass through death itself to see our loved ones again. We are assured that when we reach out to God, we will move into closer relationship with God. That closer relationship will change us. We are assured that our faith can confront fear. We are assured that when we stand in that moment with what we most long to hear in one ear and what we most dread in the other, we are standing with Jesus, our savior, who has promised us salvation. Our faith is enough to stand in there, so long as we are standing in a personal relationship with Jesus.