

One Passage, Two Stories, Three Points

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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Mark 5:21-43 (NRSV)

²¹ When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. ²² Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet ²³ and begged 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." ²⁴ So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. ²⁵ Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. ²⁶ She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.

²⁷ She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸ for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." ²⁹ Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.

³⁰ Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" ³¹ And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" ³² He looked all around to see who had done it.

³³ But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. ³⁴ He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

³⁵ While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" ³⁶ But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." ³⁷ He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James.

³⁸ When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. ³⁹ When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." ⁴⁰ And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was.

⁴¹ He took her by the hand and said to her, "*Talitha cum*," which means, "Little girl, get up!" ⁴² And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. ⁴³ He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

The rap on preachers is that every sermon has to have three points. That's not true, of course... but it is today. And since it's easier to follow the points if they feature alliteration, here you go – the three points: a curiosity, a consequence, and context.

The first point, a curiosity: Whenever I teach or preach on this particular passage I like to point out an unusual feature that many Bible readers tend to gloss over, and it all has to do with languages.

First, let's remember that the Bible wasn't written in English. When we read the New Testament, we're reading English translations of texts that originally were written in Greek. That's because in Jesus' day Greek was like the "international language" of the Mediterranean world.

In ancient Palestine, the everyday language of the people was a language similar to Hebrew called Aramaic. Jesus probably spoke Aramaic most of the time unless he was reciting the Hebrew scriptures. In the story of Jesus raising up the little girl from death, Mark the gospel writer included two Aramaic words that Jesus said, "*Talitha, cum!*" Remember, Mark was writing the story in Greek, but here he stopped and inserted into the Greek two Aramaic words.

Now, since Mark knew that many of the Greek-speaking readers of the gospel outside of Palestine wouldn't know Aramaic, Mark then resumed in Greek to explain those foreign words: "'*Talitha, cum,*' which means, 'Little girl, get up.'" And his Greek readers would say, "Ah, so *that's* what that means!"

But let me ask you: Why didn't Mark simply write, "Jesus said, 'Little girl, get up'"? Why would Mark go to the trouble of inserting two Aramaic words in his Greek narrative and then have to explain them to his Greek-speaking readers? To answer that, remember this: in our Bible every word that Jesus spoke is an English translation of a Greek translation of something he said in Aramaic. But here, in our English Bibles, we have two Aramaic words placed on the lips of Jesus. Why? Here's what I think: I think it's because someone in the room – the little girl's parents, perhaps, or one of the three disciples – someone remembered that *that's exactly what Jesus said* to the little girl. So in this passage I believe we're hearing – in the original language – words that Jesus spoke. Jesus said, "*Talitha, cum!*" That's the "curiosity" that is my first point: in this passage we hear actual words that Jesus spoke.

The second point, a consequence: Because of their faith in God the Heavenly Father, the synagogue leader and the hemorrhaging woman sought healing. And these two stories are remembered because healing was what they received. Not only did a physical remedy result, but their spirits – anxious, afraid, mournful – their spirits were also healed. Jesus pronounced on them the blessing "Do not fear, only believe." Belief replaced the fear of the woman who had endured twelve years of suffering. Trust upheld the frantic father worried for the life of his precious daughter. They didn't believe in Jesus as a magician – they believed Jesus was the conduit of the power of God. This passage of conjoined stories reminds us we can trust our lives to God's hands, as we hear in the lyrics of a hymn:

Give to the winds your fears;
hope and be undismayed:
God hears your sighs and counts your tears,
God shall lift up your head.¹

That's the second point: the consequence of putting your trust in God is that God hears your sighs, God counts your tears; God soothes, God heals, God restores.

And the third point: the context. The context of these two healing stories is, in a word, "interruption." This is a story of the work of Jesus being interrupted. The woman's healing happened as an interruption to what Jesus was doing, namely, setting out for the home of the synagogue leader Jairus to attend to his little girl. Her interruption added costly minutes to Christ's visit to Jairus' daughter. Indeed, she died before Jesus could get there.

But let's step back for a minute. Jesus and the disciples had just come ashore, having sailed from the other side of the Sea of Galilee. They didn't know about Jairus's daughter before they crossed the lake. They must have had other plans upon arrival. Maybe they were planning on teaching the crowd that met them when they came ashore. Maybe they were going to look for some dinner, or find a place to spend the night. Whatever it was that they had *planned* to do was interrupted – it was interrupted

¹ Hymn 286, verse 1 "Give to the Winds Thy Fears" (adapted). The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1990.

by the appeal of the synagogue leader for Jesus to heal his daughter. Jesus listened to his plea, and gave up whatever he had planned to do in order to attend to Jairus and his daughter.

It was during *that* interruption in his plan that Jesus was interrupted by the woman who sought his healing power by simply touching his clothes. He sensed power flowing from him. He couldn't simply walk away. He had to find out who had sought him, what her situation was, what she needed. Jesus engaged with her, met her, listened to her, commended her faith and blessed her. Once they were done, Jesus resumed his trip, comforting and encouraging Jairus and his wife and healing their daughter, restoring life to her lifeless form, raising her from death to life... and then instructing the parents to give their daughter something to eat.

We hear these stories as describing the work of Jesus being interrupted by a request for healing, which in turn was interrupted by a request for healing. But for Jesus were they really interruptions? I don't think so. Jesus gave his attention to the appeals for healing, the appeals for mercy. That father... that woman... *they* were the focus of his work.

Catholic priest, professor and author Henri Nouwen "one remarked, 'You know, my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work.'"² ...A lesson he learned from Jesus, don't you think?

As we heard, Jesus didn't give Jairus the brush-off; Jesus listened to his plight, his pain. Jesus gave his full attention to him and responded with compassion out of love. And when Jesus felt power flowing from him as he moved through the jostling crowd he didn't simply ignore it. He stopped and sought out the woman who had sought him out so he could connect with her.

When you seek Jesus, he'll connect with you. You're not interrupting him from something more important. You are important to Jesus. Revealing and sharing the love of God is what Jesus does.

He is not in a hurry, he gives us time, he gives us his full attention. Nothing is as important to Jesus as that moment that he is connecting with us. He wants to hear our whole story. Whether that moment involves us, or a loved one, being healed physically or not is not promised; but what Jesus does is to bring healing to our souls, to our very being, restoring us to him, calling us "daughter," calling us "son."

Whatever our story, whatever our journey through life has been to this point, let's reach out and touch Jesus in faith, and let him minister to us, to bring healing to us, to restore us, to welcome us into his family....³

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² Henri J.M. Nouwen, Reaching Out, p. 36) cited in Lamar Williamson, Jr., Interpretation—a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Mark. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1983, 112.

³ <https://theadditionalneedsblogfather.com/2019/04/04/what-the-woman-healed-of-bleeding-teaches-us-about-jesus/> accessed 6/22/2021