

Jesus Said, “Be Made Whole”

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
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What utter desperation! A man whose 12 year old daughter lay dying and a woman totally ostracized from family and society because of a 12 year flow of blood and now in financial ruin as well. That’s in the Gospel text for today. How hopeless they felt, how abandoned and alone.

Jairus approaches Jesus and begged him repeatedly – help! The woman anonymously approached Jesus from behind seeking only to make contact with his clothing – no face to face, no verbal exchange, no notice, but still reaching out for Help!

Jairus was a “leader of the synagogue,” reports Mark. All too often in reading Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John we get the idea that all religious leaders of Israel opposed Jesus. Not all. Here’s a Pharisee who saw in Jesus one who could address the need of his daughter. He was at his wits end seeking succor for his ill child, and he turned to Jesus.

Important for us to see this incident in the context of Palestine 2000 years ago, the death of children was much more common than in our experience. In 1st century Palestine, estimates say that 60% of people born alive died by their mid teens. Three out of five dead by 15. Only 3% of people reached the age of 60. Their experience was so very different than ours. What’s the life expectancy now? Just last Tuesday, the Associated Press published an article saying that the world’s 65-and-older population would triple by 2050 so that 1 out of 6 people will be over 65. That would mean approximately 17% of the world’s population would be 65+. Far different than the 3% who reached age 60 in Palestine 2000 years ago. Far different than the 60% death rate for children. The death of Jairus’ daughter was not as rare as in our time and place.

Nevertheless, this was not just a statistic, but a daughter – the daughter of Jairus. He implored Jesus for help, and the text reads, “So he (Jesus) went with him (Jairus).”

The reading inserts the case of the woman, and then picks up at the end with the desperately ill daughter. Let’s finish the story of Jesus and Jairus. Jesus and his inner circle of disciples enters the house full of mourners,, speaks a word to the gathered mourners who then laughed at him. When the Lord God acts it can seem preposterous. Back to Jairus and Jesus. They gathered because the girl had died. Standing next to the bed of this beloved daughter, Jesus takes her hand which violated the laws of Israel (Numbers 5:2; 19:11 which reads, “He who touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean seven days”).

Jesus was very aware of this prohibition, but he also knew that if he, the Word made flesh, touched the flesh of this girl's body, he would not become unclean but instead he would make her whole. He would restore her. You and I are to remember this incident is not about the girl, but about Jesus and how the power of the Lord God Almighty worked through him. Our focus is to remain on the one who saves, not on the saved. The restoration of the girl was accomplished by the Word made flesh full of grace and truth, Christ Jesus.

Then Jesus instructed the witnesses to this event to "give her something to eat." Nurture her life with sustenance which will feed her needs. In other words, demonstrate to her that she has a caring community supporting her and accepting her. Uphold her, strengthen her! Surround her with love! Almost like what we call recovery groups that accept, encourage, and support each other in their deadly battles with addictions. I'm not trying to trivialize the raising of Jairus' daughter into a 12 step program, but I am attempting to give some glimpse of the dynamics available in Recovery Groups that just might parallel what happened as recorded in Mark 5 when Jesus said, "Give her something to eat." Desperation relieved, a death trap broken, new life given, hope restored.

Into this story of Jesus with Jairus and his daughter is inserted the experience of the woman who had a flow of blood for 12 years, spent all her money seeking relief, and was now sicker and poorer. She must have been very desperate. Not only was she ill and poor, but she was also unclean. We'll now focus on this encounter of Jesus with this frightened woman.

We do not need to discuss the reasons and value of the Levitical laws nor the language of them, but I do think we need to know what the Hebrew Bible says that sets the context for the encounter we read about in Mark 5. In Lev. 15:19, 25 we read, "If a woman has a flow of blood for several days outside her monthly period or if her flow continues beyond her regular period, she remains unclean as long as the flow continues..." This woman was ritually unclean. That minor law sounds like a total misunderstanding of normal bodily functions, like a punishment for natural life as God made it, and as an uncaring attitude toward half the population. Ok, so it might be unenlightened and prejudicial, but it is the context in which we are to understand the plight and action of the woman in this text. She could not enter the synagogue, was cut off from ordinary human relationships, and separated from the community.

Because she was considered unclean, anyone she touched would be considered unclean – not only if she reached out to touch another, but also if another happened to touch her. In her desperation and with anonymity, she placed her hope in Jesus and reached out to touch even a square inch of his clothing – just his clothing, not even his hand. She did, and she was healed, and she knew it immediately. She thought it was over, but Jesus stopped and asked, "Who touched me?" What embarrassment. She was being singled out even though she tried to act without notice. In fact, the text reads, that the woman "came in fear and trembling (and) fell down before him and told him the whole truth." How belittling!

But wait, the beginning of this incident described her as “a woman.” But at this point, after being healed, Jesus addresses her as “Daughter.” No longer is she an impersonal, objective, unrelated “woman,” but now “daughter – a term of relationship, belonging, acceptance. Jesus declares her to be a Daughter of Abraham, an Israelite, a child of God. He restores her to community, sort of like the function of the priest in Lev. 14 who was the one to declare a person cured of Leprosy as now clean, which meant the one now cured of his disease could re-enter the community, live with his family again, and return to normal relationships. Jesus is the High Priest who restored this woman to a place among the Chosen People. Daughter!

The woman in the text could hug friends and family again and be hugged, receive and give human contact, be restored to relationships – no longer shunned and ostracized. What joy! What hope fulfilled! All because of Jesus. This story, too, is about Jesus not the woman with the flow of blood. It tells us of the power of the Almighty at work in Jesus, the Son of God, bringing new hope and life to earth – in this case to a sick woman.

Both Jairus and this woman “fall at feet of Jesus.” They come with humble hope and prayerful submission. Jesus fulfills their lives. Can we expect, then, that Jesus will bring all our loved ones back to life, heal all our illnesses? Well, no, but we can and do hope and expect that he will use his power to save us from the worst condition that afflicts every one of us: sin and selfishness. These two healing experiences proclaim to us that Jesus has the power for our ultimate healing: the forgiveness of sin, reconciliation with the Lord God, and a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Gospel witnesses to the Savior who reaches and embraces us who are gripped by fear, confusion, sorrow, and sickness and in turn gives us peace, wholeness, and hope – a peace, wholeness, and hope that transcends the struggles and tragedies of life. Two verses that have meant a lot to Kay, my wife, and me:

How excellent are the Lord’s faithful people; my greatest desire is to be with them. Psalm 16:3 (Today’s English Version)

I believe that I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living
Psalm 27:13 (NRSV)

We, too, come with humble hope and prayerful submission trusting that the Lord Jesus can take our hands and raise us up, touch our maladies and make us whole, remove our sin and make us new – even today.

We trust in the Savior, not to make everything all right by our experience or judgment (after all he did die on the cross), but to declare that we are never alone and that we have the promise of his compassion upon us always – Always! Without end. Amen.

