

Jairus' Daughter  
I Kings 17:17-24  
Mark 5:21-43

“Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and begged him repeatedly, ‘My little daughter is at the point of death....’”

I invite you, this morning, to inhabit the character of Jairus. This should not be difficult because, in spite of the two millennia that separate your life from his, you two have much in common. In the first place, of the five characters introduced in Mark’s fifth chapter—the demoniac, the woman with a hemorrhage, a daughter and a mother--Jairus has a name, as do you. In the second place, Jairus holds a position of respect in his community and, one way or another, so do you. Specifically, as a leader of the synagogue, he is responsible for arranging, sometimes even conducting worship, and for maintaining the building. His is a moral and material leadership. This leads me to surmise, in the fourth place, that whatever he does for a living, Jairus is a man of some means who has been generous with those means in his community, as you have been. Finally we know that Jairus is a family man. He has a wife and at least one daughter. Whether you have sons and daughters or you are one, you know yourself as someone who lives in the nexus of intimate relationships with people for whom you probably would do just about anything.

Now I am going to invite you to inhabit the character of the woman who has been bleeding for twelve years. Unlike you, she has no name. Or rather she has been named by her deficit, her defect, her deviation from the norm. She is one of a type. You know the type: the chronically unemployed, the formerly incarcerated, the illegal alien, the lame, the blind, the woman with a hemorrhage. You are named by your difference. But more. For by law, because of her difference, she has been banned from the community. This woman’s defect, you see, threatens the rest of the community’s well-being. Maybe once she had a family, but now she is separated even from her family and shamed.

Rather than separating these two characters and stories, Mark includes one in the other. Together they are known as a “Markan sandwich”—kind of his version of “two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions, on a sesame seed bun.” Mark’s sandwiches signal his readers that one story cannot be understood apart from the other. Curiously, he tells Jairus’ story in the historical present tense, every sentence beginning with “and.” Were it not for this woman’s story, Jairus’ story would have progressed in a straightforward, suspenseful but happy ending sort of way. The woman’s story he tells in imperfect tense, a tense that holds in solution a continuing situation in the past that is ongoing. Hers is a story of relentless suffering growing worse by the day.

Begin by inhabiting what you know of Jairus’ story. Because you are someone whose years of achievement and hard work and moral standing have given you an understandable and deserved sense of entitlement, you approach Jesus face to face. You are not used to being desperate. You have always been able to provide the best for yourself and your family. But now your situation is dire. You have reached the end of what money can do for your dying daughter. Still, as leader of the synagogue, you have connections. You know someone who knows the best healer in the country, the Great Physician some call him. He is your last hope.

Now enter the story of the nameless woman. Whereas Jairus meets Jesus face to face, you approach him anonymously, from behind, illegally crossing the border set up by religion and society to keep the clean people safe from the harm you will do to them if you even touch them. You have spent what little you had on doctors who dismissed your symptoms as female hysteria, leaving you to wonder whether the circumstances of your life really are your fault. Your only hope comes from a rumor circulating among those cast out of society that there is a man named Jesus who cares, in particular, for the nameless, the outcast, the broken in spirit. You would never presume, of course, to speak to him, but something in you trusts that if you can just touch his clothes, you will be made well.

Now put the two stories together. When Jairus encounters Jesus, he is so desperate that he falls at his feet, and begs him “: “My daughter is at the point of death. Come, lay your hands on her so that she may be made well.” In response, Jesus went with Jairus. The woman, anonymously lays her hands on the hem of Jesus’ clothes and is healed. In response, Jesus stops in his tracks. The imperfect tense of the woman’s suffering interrupts the present tense forward movement of Jairus’ life. Now she also falls at Jesus’ feet, bowing down in fear and

trembling. “*Daughter,*” Jesus says, naming her not by her deficit but as God’s own. “*Daughter,*” he says to the woman who was at the point of death, “your faith has made you well.”

The characters we inhabit with ease these days are Jairus’ friends who show up and say to him, “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher further?” Implicit in this tragic turn of events is an assumption: that one daughter’s healing has caused the other daughter’s death. Or as Bishop Will Willimon observes, “Something about the way they announce the death makes you think they almost [say] it with perverted glee. ‘See? Your daughter is dead. Mr. Compassion has really blown it this time. Jesus has spent so much time with that poor, sick-for-12-years, complaining woman that he has lost this 12-year-old from a prominent family.’” There is something about privilege and possessions—especially when we think we have earned them on our own—that leads us to fear that another person’s gain will be our loss. Jairus’ friends now see him has a victim of Jesus’ encounter with an unclean woman.

But what of Jairus? Why is it, according to Mark, that Jairus no longer can understand his life without being present in her life? Most commentators believe the key to the relationship of one story to another is the example of the woman’s faith that Jairus lacks. But that is a bit too pious for me. Rather I think the sandwich has to do with holding together in Jairus’ head and heart his own daughter, his 12-year-old daughter, on her deathbed, and this outcast, unclean woman, who has been as good as dead for 12 years to religion and society. Jesus should have been contaminated by the woman’s touch just as Jesus now faced being contaminated by touching the dead body of Jairus’ daughter. Yet in being touched and touching, Jesus makes both daughters whole, clean, alive. This physician’s love is not the zero sum game that our love is. For Jairus, the daughter on the road who was dead and is alive again in Christ is no less Jairus’ daughter than the daughter whose dying sent him begging Jesus for help.

What have our stories to do with the stories of the nameless refugees, the parents with their children and still without their children at our borders? What of the death-stalked parents who thought to themselves, “If my child’s feet just touch the soil of the United States of America,” then the imperfect tense of my daughter’s life will be turned to a present tense, even a future tense of hope? How many fathers will be pleading for the lives of their daughters, mothers for the lives of their sons who are lost to them—as good as dead? Does their presence in our country really contaminate us or could their lives made whole be our saving grace? We can no longer understand our story as a nation without the imperfect tense of their stories sandwiched into our forward movement.

In this week that marks the founding of our nation, we can no longer understand the story our nation apart from the stories of refugees refused, of families separated, of children orphaned lest their gain of a future be our loss. That is so not only for the nameless sons and daughters fleeing death in other lands but for our children in this land. We have indeed grown accustomed to separating families in this country through mass incarceration, juvenile detention and foster care: 61,000 foster children have simply gone missing since the year 2000.

We have been living our Jairus-present-tense-stories with happy endings for decades without being seriously interrupted by the imperfect tense suffering of countless, nameless children who mistakenly thought their only real hope involved elbowing their way through our indifference to touch the hem of the garment, the soil of the land that once was known as a beacon of hope for those yearning to breathe free.

As Christ’s body in the world, we are that garment which to touch is to be given hope and a future tense. As Christ’s hands in the world, what are our hands for if not to touch the unclean, the outcast and say, “Little girl, little boy, get up! As Christ’s presence in the world, what are our sanctuaries if they are not just that: sanctuaries, safe havens, refuge for refugees in a nation that would send them back to certain death? Yet no one “is going to break a sweat elbowing his or her way into [a mainline] church,” writer, poet and pastor Kate Layzer writes, because they are desperately seeking the Great Physician, “the one who loves fiercely and speaks sharply, who looks us in the eye and speaks to us of God’s uncompromising love, who startles us with more forgiveness than we think we deserve, who challenges us to extend the same to others. They want the Jesus who commands us to love enemies, serve the poor and see ourselves in the stranger. They want the Jesus who makes them cry in church—not out of sadness, but because after long years of trying everything else, they have brushed up against him and felt something inside begin to heal, and love reawakening when they thought it was gone for good.”

I invite you to stand and confess with me our faith in that Jesus using the words of Jose Luis Casal, Cuban American Presbyterian and Director of our denomination’s World Mission:

I believe in Jesus Christ, a displaced Galilean,  
who was born away from his people and his home,  
who fled his country with his parents when his life was in danger,  
who suffered under the oppression of Pontius Pilate,  
who was persecuted, beaten, tortured, and unjustly condemned to death.  
But on the third day, Jesus rose from the dead,  
not as a scorned foreigner but to offer us citizenship in God's kingdom.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the eternal immigrant from God's kingdom among us,  
who speaks all languages, lives in all countries, and reunites all races.  
I believe in the church as the secure home for foreigners and for all believers.  
I believe the communion of saints begins  
when we embrace all God's people in all their diversity.  
I believe in forgiveness, which makes us all equal before God,  
and in reconciliation, which heals our brokenness.  
I believe in the Resurrection  
where God will unite us as one people,  
where all are distinct and all are alike at the same time.  
I believe in life eternal, where no one will be foreigner,  
but all will be citizens of the kingdom where God reigns forever and ever."

"Maybe the mainline is not dead but only sleeping." Jesus says to us as he said to Jairus: "Do not fear, only believe!" Thanks be to God. Amen.