

Death, dying, and the Risen Lord

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Bloomquist
St. Peter and Paul's Anglican Church Ottawa
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When Jesus had crossed over to the other side of the lake, a huge crowd gathered around him beside the lake. One of the leaders of the synagogue, a man named Jairus, also came. When he saw Jesus, he fell at Jesus' feet and started pleading with Jesus, saying "My little daughter is dying. Come, lay your hands on her so that she may be delivered and live." Jesus went with him.

The huge crowd that had gathered on the shore followed him and was pushing in on him. In the crowd, there was a woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years. She had suffered much at the hands of doctors: she had spent everything that she had, but instead of getting better, she was getting worse. When she heard about Jesus and that he was there, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said to herself "If I even just touch a part of his cloak, I shall be delivered." Immediately, her flow of blood stopped. She knew in her body that she had been healed of the affliction. But, Jesus also knew immediately in himself that power had gone out from him. So he turned to the crowd and said: "Who touched me?" His disciples said to him: "How can you say 'who touched me?' when you see the crowd pushing in on you?" But he looked around to see who had done it. The woman was in great fear and trembling, knowing what she had done. So she came and fell down before him and told him the whole truth. Jesus said to her: "Daughter, your faith has indeed delivered you. Go in peace and be healed from this affliction."

While he was still speaking with her, members of the synagogue leader's household came and said: "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any longer?" Jesus overheard what they were saying. So he said to the synagogue leader: "Do not fear; just have faith." Jesus let only Peter, James, and John, the brother of James, come with him. They came to the leader's house and saw a great commotion, people weeping and wailing. Entering the house, Jesus said to them: "Why are you making such a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead, just sleeping." They ridiculed him, but he cast them all out. Then he took the child's father and mother, and those who had come with him, and he went to the child's room. He grabbed the child's hand and said to her: "Talitha koum", which means 'Little girl, I say to you, arise'. Immediately, the little girl arose and started walking around. (She was 12.) Everyone was awestruck. But, Jesus gave strict orders that no one was to know anything about this. Then he said: "Give her something to eat."

It was another early morning. As soon as the sun was up, it was hot. And when it got hot, it was impossible to sleep any longer... if you could call it sleep, trying to get comfortable on the hay that she had to use for a mattress. It was the only thing that she had. Besides, it would soak up the blood.

But, when the sun came up, and it started to get hot, then there was no way that she could continue in bed. She had to get rid of the hay that she had used. Take it out and burn it. The first time that she hadn't done so the flies had gotten so bad that she had spots all over her. Even now she could hear them buzzing in and out her windows, which were just holes in the wall of her mud hut.

It was just an isolated house, set way back up from the shore line. She had once lived with her mother and father and sisters and brothers in the city. And then she had been married off as a young girl. She had lived happily with her husband for years, but then the hemorrhaging had started. Her husband left her when it didn't stop. She got up one morning, and he dismissed her with the divorce. As he was leaving he said: 'I can't sleep with you; I'll be defiled every time I do. I'll never be able to go to the synagogue. I'll never be able to go to the market for my business dealings. And if we have children, they'll be defiled from birth. You have been cursed by someone. (That's what the word "affliction" means.) Maybe it was one of my rivals or yours; maybe it was someone you hurt; maybe it was God. I don't know. Anyway, here's your dowry back. You'll have enough money to live on, if you live. In any case: Goodbye and good luck. You'll need it.'

That's how she ended up way out here in the country, near enough to the shore to be able to wash but far enough away from anyone else so that they couldn't see her pollute the water.

And also near enough to the main road so that if someone who could help her passed by, she might be healed. She tried everyone and everything: doctors and magicians, spells and potions. She spent everything in her dowry on trying to find a solution. All the doctors and magicians did was give her solutions that didn't work in exchange for her money. Now she had nothing, not even a penny. She even had to forage for the hay for her bed, as well as for roots and left over crops to eat.

And now it was another morning, without money, no friends, nothing.

Then, suddenly outside her house, she heard a commotion, a huge crowd not too far from her house, along the road. She ran out and tried to ask what was going on. But, when people saw her blood-stained skirt, they backed away. So she shouted: "What's going on?" They shouted back: "It's Jesus, the healer."

That's when she decided to try something even though she also knew what would happen if she were caught.

That same morning, just as the sun was coming up over the city, in the comfortable residential section of the city, the leader of one of the city's synagogues awoke. He couldn't have been asleep for long. All night he had had an interrupted sleep. His daughter was sick, and had gotten much worse over the course of the night. They had tried everything. He had friends, important friends, other synagogue officials, doctors, lawyers, architects. So, he had called on one of his doctor friends, who had come running and was still there.

As a man of prayer, he had been praying whenever he was awake, and he was now praying his morning prayers. But, he was distracted by his servants who were talking loudly about the little girl. They kept mentioning the name of Jesus. The synagogue leader knew all about this Jesus. Everyone was talking about him. In the synagogue they called him an imposter and a blasphemer.

Then suddenly his little girl cried out. There was silence.

That's when he decided to try something even though he knew what would happen to him if any of his colleagues found out what he had done.

On the shore, a huge crowd made it difficult for Jesus to walk. Suddenly, some men started pushing and shoving the crowd apart. "Make way for administrator Jairus," they said. With difficulty, they pushed through the crowd so that the honoured

leader of the synagogue could reach Jesus. When he did, the crowd was astonished to see this distinguished leader of the very synagogue in which Jesus had only recently been denounced as an imposter fall on his face before this same Jesus. And what was he saying? ‘Come, lay your hands on my dying daughter. Free her from this affliction so she can live.’

Jesus doesn’t say: “Tell me a bit more about what the problem is” in order to see whether he can actually do what is asked of him, much as a doctor would do. Jesus doesn’t say: “Tell me what she’s done wrong?” or “tell me if someone has cursed her”. Nor does Jesus bargain with the synagogue leader as a magician would have, telling him: “Yes, I can do this for you. How does 40,000 denarii sound for bringing her back to life?”

Jesus asks for nothing. He simply hears Jairus and then sets off with him toward the city.

But, they don’t get very far. While Jesus’ closest disciples are trying to push the crowd back so that Jesus can get to the town in time to heal the little girl, suddenly Jesus stops. He looks around him and says “Who touched me?” The disciples look at each other puzzled and say to themselves: “Who didn’t touch him?” But, they didn’t say this to Jesus. Instead, they ask him: “Why are you asking this?” Jesus doesn’t even bother to answer.

And then the crowd starts to part, not this time for a respected leader, who is still at Jesus’ side, but for a middle-aged woman with blood-encrusted garments. “Get back”, they shout, “She’s sick. She’s unclean”. The synagogue leader steps back, way back.

Trembling, pale, not just from years of losing blood but from the fear that has gripped her, the woman falls at Jesus feet. Through her trembling speech, she tells Jesus about when she first started losing blood, how she thought it was normal, how it got worse, how her husband had divorced her, and how she had spent her whole dowry on doctors and magicians. And then, she told Jesus: “And then when I heard the commotion, and heard others saying that you had healed others like me, I thought that if I got close enough to you in the crowd, I could be healed. So, I reached out and just touched your cloak. I felt this jolt in my body. Then, I realized that blood was no longer trickling down my leg. I thought: I’ve been healed! I can’t have been healed! But I am! Whatever it was that had cursed me is gone! I’ve been healed! I was stunned. But, I also knew that I had stolen something from you. So when you stopped, I thought: ‘Oh no. He knows what’s happened?’ You looked around as if you were looking for someone, and I knew that you were looking for me! I tried to escape but people kept pressing in and I couldn’t get away. I knew you’d find me sooner or later so here I am. But, I don’t have any money to repay you.” And she lowered her eyes, waiting for his judgment.

Let me explain to you in this crowd gathered here this morning what this woman is saying. I’ll try to translate it into 21st century Canadian.

In the world in which this woman and Jesus live, a closed system, there is nothing that changes hands that does not have some form of payback. No one gets something without paying for it. No one takes something without paying for it without there being a consequence. No one gives away something without expecting some form of payback. In fact, even a rich person who gives money to a beggar who cannot pay the money back or do any favour expects a payback. So, he never gives the beggar money in secret but *only* when others can see him so that the others will honour him and say “My, what a generous man”. That is his payback.

So, when the woman comes up behind Jesus she knows full well what she is doing: she is stealing, taking something without paying for it. She knows it, and everyone in the crowd knows it.

So, the crowd looks at Jesus, who has never seen this stranger before, and say to themselves: ‘Let’s watch and see what he does to her as a consequence. Will he force her to pay or get one of his disciples to shake her down? Will he send her off to jail until she can pay every penny that she owes him?’

But, there is one context, and one context only, in this society when you do not need to provide payback if you are given something or even if you take something. That is if you are family. Even today parents do not ask their kids after 10 years of allowances to pay back the allowance that they received over the first 10 years of their lives. Or if a child takes a cookie from the family cookie jar without asking, we don’t say: “Off with his hand!” In family, what you have is mine, and what I have is yours.

Do you see where this is going?

Jesus looks at the woman and utters one simple word which changes everything in her situation. He looks down at her and says to her: "Daughter".

The crowd is expecting judgment, and instead they hear Jesus talk of this woman as excuse me? Jesus, this is not your daughter. You don't have any children... especially not this age!

Jesus ignores the ignorant crowd and continues speaking to the woman: 'Daughter, we're family, so you don't owe me anything.'

We call this adoption. Jesus adopts her. And in doing so, he effectively says to her: What I have is yours and what you have is mine. This can only be said by a family member to a family member. Jesus says to her: 'You couldn't have stolen anything from me because what I have is yours'. Jesus extended his family care to this woman, a complete stranger, and on top of that someone unable to give him anything.

Or better said ... to give him anything of worth. Because, while it is true that this woman is told to go her way healed, and there is no charge, she has still taken something from Jesus, and she has left him with something. She has taken power, leaving him poorer and less powerful, and she has also left him her defilement.

Remember her husband? Every time she came in contact with him, he was defiled because she was defiled. Defilement comes from any form of sickness or sin that is leading one toward death. Jesus is defiled when she touches him, taking life from him as he is given her dying in exchange. When Jesus sends her away, it is very true what he says: Your faith in what I was able to do for you has delivered you from the curse. You are well. Go your way healed of your curse. But, what Jesus doesn't say is what everyone who was watching this scene unfold would also have known, namely, that Jesus is now carrying this woman's defilement and curse, her living death, in his body. Like the legion of demons cast out of the possessed man in the previous chapter, the affliction has to go somewhere. Even Galileans knew that in exchanges of energy, no energy is lost or disappears; it just changes form. In this case, the woman's dying now clings to Jesus.

Everyone there that day in the crowd knew it, including the leader of the synagogue who is standing right there and has seen everything and heard everything. So, the synagogue leader says to himself, "Now what do I do? I've asked Jesus the healer to come to my house to heal my dying girl. But, if I do, I let Jesus, now defiled and cursed, bearing living death in his body, enter my house, come right to my little girl's bedside, even possibly touch her... and thus communicate to her the disease that this woman had and her curse. If he touches her that will be just enough to push my daughter over the edge into death itself. Uh, Jesus, I think that we should just ..."

When all of a sudden, his servants came running up to him with the news he had hoped to avoid: "Your daughter's dead." As he starts to mourn, Jesus, the one who carries in his body the illness and dying not just of this woman but of more men and women than this leader realizes, turns and with complete confidence tells him: 'Trust me'. He takes with him only the ruler and his three closest disciples. When he arrives at the house, he casts all the mourners out of the house because they show their faithlessness by mocking him. He comes to the bedside of the dead girl and to her father's horror Jesus not only touches her but grabs her hand.

Then Jesus speaks to her words that the evangelist Mark will know were the very words that the risen Lord Jesus himself was to hear in the tomb that glorious Easter morning from his own Father: 'Arise'. And immediately this little girl is alive from among the dead in the same way that that woman on the road was now fully alive after having been among the dying for 12 years. And in the midst of the parents' awe, he tells the parents what he will tell his disciples that first Easter morning: let's have something to eat!

My friends, this morning you and I are listening to this story on this side of Easter, in the presence of our risen Lord. But, the evangelist Mark is telling this story about a time when Easter was still some time off. There were still weeks, maybe months, maybe years to go before the events of Jesus' final Passover and Easter. This story points toward that Easter. But, before we can get to Easter Jesus must meet and pass on life to hundreds, perhaps thousands more, even as He takes on himself their dyings

and their deaths. And of course before we get to Easter, we must pass through a time that none of us will ever have to pass through because Jesus has passed through it for us.

In this story we have witnessed two women move from dying and death into life because they have been freely given life by Jesus. And in this same story we have also witnessed Jesus take upon himself, in exchange for life, one woman's dying and another woman's death. But, this story is only a snapshot of who Jesus is and what he has done.

Mark and the other evangelists will continue to tell us story after story of how this same Jesus met others and gave them life by taking on Himself their griefs, their sorrows, and even their deaths. And in fact, we will learn what no eye could ever have seen nor ear heard that on the cross, once and for all, when he did the same for the whole world. Not only for those who lived during his lifetime, like these two women, but also for those who had gone before him -- including the millions of Jonathans and Sauls once slain upon the hills of battle -- as well the millions, and now billions, who would come after, the mighty and richest of the world, as well as those who came into this world with nothing and never had anything, whether it be money, or health, or happiness.

No one, no one can understand fully how He became poor for the whole world by taking all of our poverty, our sickness, and our death upon himself and in exchange gave life to all those who turned to Him in faith.

My friends, in a moment, you and I will be able to do more than touch the hem of his garment. In a moment, we will be invited by Him to do more than even touch Him. By God's grace, in a mystery too great for even the greatest mind to understand, we will be invited to take and eat His body and drink His blood.

As you do today, you will be privileged to receive much more even than the woman at the road did, much more than the little girl did when he grabbed her hand. You will be invited to take Him in, this one who is now the risen Lord, and to feel in your bodies the jolt as His risen life gives you life and as He takes from you all that is hidden deep within you: your greatest fears, your greatest griefs, the sicknesses that are killing you, even if you don't know it or aren't willing to admit it, even your very death. He will take them upon Himself, my brothers and sisters, His sons and daughters, without asking anything from you as payment. There is no payment in fact that you could possibly make.

But, one of the reasons that this feast is called the Eucharist is because that is the Greek word for "thank you". And that, indeed, is something that you can offer Him. Will you join me at the altar and together with me say "thank you" for what He has done? "Thank you, Lord."

I include here for those who have read this sermon, a wonderful retelling by the author himself, Walter Wangerin, of "The Ragman", a story that has significant resonance with this sermon. It is followed by a musical interpretation by the blind pianist, Ken Medema. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNH0E4bmnOg>