

## A Multidimensional Faith

Mark 5:21-43

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Kyle Childress

The Word of God recorded in the Bible is always a contextual word. It is heard differently in different circumstances and different contexts. What and how we read the Bible varies from when we were ten years old and when we were 70 years old. How we read it in Sunday School in 1965 will be different than how we read it in the post-hurricane remnant of a village in Haiti. And how we read it alone will likely be different than when we read it sitting beside someone whose loved one just died from cancer or reading it in church among sisters and brothers who come from a different tradition or racial/ethnic group.

I retell this story with Joe Richardson's permission but many of you might remember Joe telling how he memorized the shortest verse in the Bible (or at least in the KJV), "Jesus wept," (John 11:35) when he was a junior high boy and had to commit Bible verses to memory. As a boy, it was the source of laughter to be called on the stand and recite a Bible verse and say, "Jesus wept." Years went by. Joe and Marilyn were in the hospital waiting room in agony and crying with worry over their daughter Karen's diagnosis of brain cancer. While weeping and praying, Joe said, "Jesus wept" came back to him. This time not in laughter but in the realization that he did not weep alone; Jesus wept with him for Karen.

Context changes how we read the Bible.

Today Mark tells us two intertwined stories, or as some scholars say, “sandwich stories” in which a story is wrapped within a story so the reader might relate the two. Today we read the story of Jairus’ daughter wrapped around the story of the woman with the hemorrhage of blood for twelve years.

To begin let’s suppose we’re home alone sitting in a chair and reading our Bible. That’s our context. Mark tells us that Jesus crossed again the Sea of Galilee to the Jewish side and another big crowd gathers around him when he steps off of the boat. A well-to-do and influential man, a leader of the synagogue, Jairus, comes directly up to Jesus. Even in the crowd, Jairus is able to come immediately to Jesus. Jairus falls down in front of Jesus and begins to weep. His beloved twelve-year-old daughter is sick unto death. “Please, Jesus. Can you help?”

When sitting at home reading this story in our Bible, perhaps we begin to think about our own deepest needs. Maybe this is how we should pray to Jesus? By falling on our knees and begging? Even this ruler of synagogue, this influential leader of the community humbles himself and pleads.

But we keep on reading. Jesus leaves with Jairus to go to the sick daughter and the crowd presses in on Jesus as he goes. People are jostling, the disciples are around Jesus trying to keep order and clear the way. And Mark tells us that an unnamed woman who has hemorrhaged for twelve years works her way through the crowd and comes up behind him and touches his coat. She does not assume Jesus will engage her and does not think the disciples will clear the way for her to go directly to Jesus, so she comes up from behind him. She doesn’t meet his eye. She doesn’t even speak to Jesus or to anyone else. Her only words are spoken to herself, “If I can only touch his cloak, I will be made well.”

Which way do you come to Jesus? Do you come through the front door or the back door? Up front or from around back? Which way do you pray? Some people pray through articulate words and requests while other people pray by silent touch, handling prayer beads or a rosary or kneeling or simply being silent in the presence of Jesus. Are your prayers words or actions?

Though their approaches are very different, both people find health – or salvation, which is the same word in Greek.

The first thing Jairus says to Jesus when he came and fell at Jesus' feet was, "My little daughter." So we surmise that the daughter is a member of a loving and supportive family. By contrast, the woman with hemorrhages comes to Jesus alone, and in fear and trembling. She has no support, no community, no friends, no network of love and trust to help her through her struggles, but Jesus says to her the same relational word, "Daughter." In other words, "If you have no family, be part of mine."

When we're reading this story many of us need to hear Jesus say to us, "Daughter." Or perhaps "son." "Become part of my family."

Both stories involve touching but they're different kinds of touching. Jesus touches Jairus' daughter by taking her by the hand. But with the hemorrhaging woman it is the other way around. She touches him. With Jesus, it's not just that he touches us or renews us or forgives us or heals us. It's also that when we touch him, he is affected. Our needs, our efforts, our gestures touch Jesus and he notices.

Our lives make a difference to Jesus. He feels the power go out from him to a poor, outcast, alone woman. He notices and he cares.

Pay attention to the prayers in this story. Jairus' prayer is for his daughter; the woman's prayer is for herself. Both prayers lead to healing and salvation. Both Jairus and the woman demonstrate faith but we know nothing about the faith of the young girl. She is healed and saved by the power and love of Jesus and the faith and persistence of her father. Let's pause over that for a moment.

Many of us here this morning probably identify with Jairus. We're not like the isolated and ostracized woman. We are Jairus. To be Jairus is to be up front about getting on our knees and pleading with Jesus for the sake of others. Others of us identify with the helpless and desperate woman. Nevertheless we persist in our prayers. The crowd does not part for us, but we do not give up. This is why we do the Prayers of Concern and Celebration every Sunday morning. All of us come before Jesus – those of us who are leaders in our community and those who are social outcasts. Here, before Jesus, the ground is level. We're all here in Jesus' presence in need. And we come together praying and pleading and asking.

But this story has more. As you've heard me say many times before, there is a thickness of meaning in scripture. And so far we're just skimming the first level. Instead of reading this alone in our own home, let's read this alongside sisters and brothers who have experienced injustice. Let's read this in solidarity; by being allies with those who suffer.

How different this story is for those who have money and power and those who do not. Jairus is an influential leader who is shown directly to Jesus. Five

times Mark mention the crowd surrounding Jesus in the first few verses but when Jairus shows up, he is shown in immediately. By contrast, the hemorrhaging woman is about as excluded as you can get. She had been bleeding, and thus was unacceptable in public. And Mark is emphatic and goes into detail of all she had endured. She had seen many doctors and had spent all of her money on medical bills, and not only had she not gotten better she had gotten worse. No health care insurance, no Medicaid, and the doctors were either quacks or wouldn't see her. And all of it had bankrupted her. She is sick, getting sicker, is broke, and has no network, no family, no community. Therefore, she has no hope.

But Jairus is also in despair. For all of his money and influence, he has a problem money can't solve. And in this country, when influential people have problems that money can't solve, often they get angry. They're entitled. They expect and assume there are answers or they will get what they're entitled to. But Jairus has to learn the hard way that his wealth can't protect him. He is not entitled. His daughter dies, which makes her ritually unclean, just as the hemorrhaging woman is ritually unclean.

And that brings us to the heart of this story. It is a story about purity. The young girl is twelve years old, the age when in that day and time, she becomes a woman and can be married. The hemorrhaging woman is a woman for whom sex and children in this day and time are impossible. Jesus comes into contact with both, and in that religious culture should have made him impure. But instead, the very opposite occurs. Jesus does not become impure. Rather, both women become holy.

Think about how revolutionary this is. We're in a culture that obsesses about purity of one sort or another. From wearing white at a wedding to building walls along the border – it is about separate but equal, pure, undefiled, no mixing. It's about insiders and outsiders, those who are privileged and those who are not. We're constantly worried over losing it, so we protect it, and guard it.

But in this story, purity is not something we possess and control. Rather it is something that is a gift. Jesus gives both women in this story purity, or holiness. It is holiness that is contagious. Purity is infectious. Jesus has so much healing power and holiness and compassion that when the unclean woman gets anywhere near him, she catches his holiness.

We want to be the kind of people, the kind of church, that instead of fearing that some people will make us dirty if we're around the “wrong” kind, we are so full of love and compassion, truth and grace, justice and holiness that we infect everyone who comes anywhere near us. We want to contaminate others with peace and goodness.

Notice what happens to the woman who is healed and saved by touching the hem of Jesus' cloak. Jesus feels power go out of him and says, “Who touched me?” The disciples, in the middle of the crowd say, “What? In this crowd fifty people just touched you!”

But the woman knows what happened. She is afraid. She touched a holy man and has been found out so she comes forth to Jesus. No longer behind him and no longer on the side, now she is center stage in front of Jesus. She falls down before Jesus just like Jairus had fallen down before him earlier, suggesting that both are

now equal. She clears her throat. Speaks up – and I love this phrase – she told him “the whole truth” (v. 33).

To tell Jesus “the whole truth” she told not only about touching his garment in the crowd, but the whole truth of her illness, the whole truth of the purity system, the whole truth of the insurance industry, the whole truth of medical industry, the whole truth of being an outcast, . . . the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

I wonder if there might have been some nearby who did not want to hear the whole truth. Some entitled leaders who did not like the whole truth. Or maybe some powerful men were in the crowd, who became angry and outraged about the whole truth.

I don't know. But I do know that Jesus said to her, “Daughter.” In other words, “You are not an outcast but a member of the family of Israel. My family. Your stubborn and persistent faith has made you whole. Go in peace and be healed. Be saved.”

Meanwhile, news comes that the twelve-year-old daughter of Jairus has died. Jesus says to him, “Do not fear, only believe” (v. 36).

Jesus arrives at the house, where there is much commotion and orders everyone out except for the child's mother and father and those closest to himself. He then raises her and the story ends with Jesus telling people to get the girl something to eat.

If I had time I'd talk about a traditional reading, one that has been done across centuries, that would emphasize the connections between the twelve-year-old daughter and the woman who had been sick for twelve years and what Mark is saying about the twelve tribes of Israel. The dearly beloved daughter of God, the people of the covenant, Israel, is sick and close to death. Jesus comes to save Israel but when he comes he is overwhelmed with the need for healing all of humanity, Gentiles too. And instead of seeing this as a distraction, Jesus shows us that this is at the very heart of who he is and what he is about. The daughters of Israel are more inclusive than first supposed.

This story commends the persistent faith of the woman with the issue of blood. She would not give up on making her way to the center of the story and when she finally was given the chance, she told the whole truth. Meanwhile, Jairus the leader with privilege, did not try to exclude her because he was trying to hurry Jesus to his own house. It seems that he stepped aside, gave up his sense of entitlement, and allowed the rightful claims of this woman to be addressed by Jesus. He too is a model of faith.

I've gone through all this to encourage us to have a multidimensional faith that reads the Bible multidimensionally. We need a faith that is thicker and recognizes that God speaks to us through the Bible in various ways and various readings. If we read it only one way, we are missing out. And if one reading is uncomfortable to us, perhaps that is where God is pushing us and challenging us. God calls us to be a resilient people, with roots so deep that we remain faithful no matter what winds blow and storms come.

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.*