

When What You Know Isn't So

Read Mark 5:21-43

I still find, floating around the cobwebs of my mind, a smattering of sayings, quotations, and descriptive words planted there over the years by my late, and in my view, great brother-in-law Larry. After a hefty meal, Larry would take to the recliner and say he was bloviating. When people were expressing strong displeasure about someone or other, he would quote Shakespeare: "The quality of mercy is not strained." And one of my favorites and most useful sayings was this: "It's not what you don't know that will hurt you; it's what you know that ain't so, that's what will hurt you." Nowhere is that more true than in the spiritual life.

In the text we just read from Mark's Gospel, we see Mark using one of his favorite techniques in writing his work. He places a story within a story. The passage starts out with an urgent plea from a synagogue leader named Jairus. His daughter is sick unto death. He'd heard of Jesus' healing miracles. Come quickly Jesus! Save her! Jesus agreed to go home with him. We're not told at what pace he walked or that he ran. The Lord of time never seems to be in a hurry and surrounded by a pressing throng of people it is doubtful that his progress toward Jairus's house was proceeding very rapidly.

Think how slowly the crowd moved through the gates at the last Phillies game you went to, inching along at a snail's pace. Or think of how long it takes the person you came to church with as you patiently wait in the parking lot to finally emerge from the Hearth Room. I think about how long it takes my wife to leave our home for an outing or to leave a party after I've long grown weary of socializing, introvert that I am. I call it, tongue firmly in cheek, the Stations of the Cross.

Then on that day long ago as Jairus impatiently tried to hurry Jesus along came the fateful and fatal interruption. The woman who slipped through the crowd that day to interrupt their progress was not sick unto death perhaps, but her hemorrhaging condition rendered her an unclean, social outcast. Contact with her by the so-called clean people would have caused them to be seen as

unclean as well. Not only was she a pariah among her peers, but she had spent everything she had seeking medical help, all to no avail. She was impoverished socially and financially. In the words of the country song, “freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose; nothin’ ain’t worth nothin’ but it’s free.” This poor woman had the freedom of nothingness. She was living a life of quiet desperation, but she’d heard about Jesus. What did she have to lose?

With no more regard for whom she touched and for who touched her, she amid the tightly jostling crowd stretched out her hand and touched the hem of Jesus’ garment. You might say her hope in Jesus bested any concern for religious scruples. When you are desperate the rules are unimportant. Isn’t it true for us all that religion tends to lose its grip on us when we are truly needy? We cry out, “Have mercy upon me, a sinner.” Though this woman made no audible cry, she dared to touch him, and Jesus felt the power go forth from him. It seems that his very life force finds human need when coupled with faith and hope irresistible.

With her touch, the whole caravan moving toward Jairus’s house came to a halt. Can you imagine Jairus’s frustration at this point? He, as a leader of the synagogue, may have even been one of the people who pronounced this stricken woman unclean; we don’t know, but it is entirely possible. His important mission to get help for his daughter was being interrupted. The woman, who had already been suffering for twelve years, could surely wait a little longer, should wait her turn so to speak.

But Jesus was not in the habit of putting people off because he was in a hurry. As the creator of time he is also the Lord of time. He is also the Lord of all circumstances whether we can see it or not, trust it or not, believe it or not.

You will recall when Jesus heard that his good friend Lazarus was sick unto death he delayed his departure to go to him. He waited until Lazarus was dead before he even got in motion. Lazarus’ sister Martha scolded Jesus when he finally arrived on the scene, never expecting Jesus to call her brother forth from the tomb after he’d been buried four days. “Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.” You have failed us. Why did you delay? Did Martha think Jesus was being coldly cavalier when he said, “Your brother will rise

again.” She must have thought it was a lousy time to discuss abstract theology when her heart was bleeding with grief before him. How could she have known what was soon to happen, that her brother would rise again, not just in the sweet by and by but in just a matter of hours?

We must learn to pay attention to our interruptions if we would walk with Jesus. I remember reading years ago an article by a famous, mega-church pastor. He told of sitting in his study trying to do something on his agenda that seemed of utmost importance. The phone kept ringing. People kept knocking on his door with their, “I’m sorry buts.” He finally cried out to the Lord saying, “Lord I can’t get my ministry done in the midst of all these interruptions.” To which the Lord shot back, “Your ministry is in the interruptions.”

That little vignette has helped me countless times over my forty years as a pastor. People knock on my door. Come in. Hi Pastor Bill, are you busy? Yes I am. Please come in. Have a seat. What’s going on? Even when my door is closed, I seek to cultivate an open heart, to lead a life that is spacious enough for all the interruptions God sends my way. It works for me and leads me into some of the most precious and satisfying episodes of pastoral work. I learned this from the article and I keep on learning it from Jesus.

In that interruption that day, Jesus saved a woman’s life. Not only did her bleeding stop. He put an end to her being ostracized by her community. “What you have called unclean, whom you have called unclean for twelve years, I now make clean because this poor woman had enough hope to believe in me. Her faith has made her whole in body, soul, and spirit.” He brought her exile to an end because she was worth the time and the power to heal that only Jesus had to offer. The crowd had looked upon her after all these years as someone without hope. They knew that her life had become but a pointless source of potential contamination for all the so-called clean people. Her condition had endured long enough to be viewed as a sheer fact.

But what they thought they knew so well, she knew was not so. Jesus came by and she had hope enough to seize the opportunity to be made whole. And

Jesus looked at her, not as someone to avoid but as someone worth investing in with his time and with his grace.

That's how we should look upon one another in the time we have all the time. God puts people in our paths who are worth it, whether we know it or not. It's up to us to decide whether or not we will treat them like Jesus did or reject them along with the rest of the smug, surrounding crowd. Is there someone who comes to your mind as you hear these words? Pay close attention now and hear what the Spirit is saying to you.

So concludes the ministry to the interruption. Now back to our original story. Thanks to the interruption the situation has changed dramatically. The sick girl has died. A new certainty has taken shape. Any further concern will be but a waste. Time has run out. The girl is dead. Of that we are certain. Don't trouble yourself any further. For you to come now will be useless. We know that death is final: end of the line, end of story. Our fearful enemy has claimed another, this time tragically; she was so young. She never even had the chance to reach her potential. It's too sad. To which Jesus said, in the face of such weighty, well known, and well worn facts, "Don't be afraid, only believe." It's what you know that ain't so that will hurt you.

The mourners that day, those paid to wail and weep outside the dead girl's home, took time off from their professional sadness when they heard Jesus say, "She's not dead, only sleeping." They knew the difference between dying and taking a nap. The mourners had the facts on their side. They took the chance to scoff, to jeer and mock, and to hurl waves of unbelief in Jesus' direction. They knew what they knew and strongly believed it to be true, no exceptions.

Had they had any sense to recognize that in Jesus there was a power that they knew not of, had they had but a shred of humility, they might have witnessed a great miracle firsthand. But since they were hostile Jesus kept them outside, out of sight, and out of mind. Their unbelief was their loss. He took with him only Peter, James, and John, and mom and dad and went in to the girl where she lay.

I wonder how many miracles we miss simply because we think we know better. We have become too intellectually proud to even admit the possibility of divine intervention in our lives. So, immersed in what we think we know that may not be so, we stop praying, we stop watching and waiting, we cease expecting anything but the ordinary things we know. We never break through into the realm beyond doubt that Jesus calls faith.

Think of the affirmations of faith we make at the end of the Apostle's Creed: I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Unless you were there during the forty days after the first Easter when the resurrected Jesus appeared to several thousand people who became eyewitnesses that he was in fact alive and well, you've never seen a resurrected body. You might meet someone who had a near death experience. You might talk to someone who encountered the light at the end of a dark tunnel and came back to tell you about it. But you have never gone to the graveyard after three days and found your loved one risen and walking around, sharing meals with you and teaching you how to move forward in your life.

We face the same challenge that people who believe in Jesus have always encountered. You must believe these things because of the testimony passed down over two thousand years during which countless lives have been changed by Jesus' present but invisible Spirit. What your eyes, your senses, and sometimes though not always, your intellect tells you is: it ain't so. We know about these things and they are impossible. Faith answers: all things are possible with God; only believe.

The story ends without theatrics, without melodrama, without spiritual pyrotechnics of any kind. There in the privacy of a child's bedroom, with mom and dad and a few disciples on hand to witness what happens, Jesus gently says, "Little girl, get up." Her eyes fluttered open and up she arose and walked around the room, to great consternation and great joy. And just for a little added flair, Jesus acts like an Italian grandmother: "Give her something to eat." Dying makes you hungry. If you are brought back you'll be wanting a good, square meal. In this one little detail, Jesus once again shows that his concern is for the whole

person, body, soul, and spirit. There is nothing super-spiritual about his ministry to us. Our faith is fully down to earth and truly bound for heavenly glory.

As I've grown older, I've experienced the constant erosion of many of my used-to-be certainties. Jesus has been teaching me all about the things I know that ain't so as he has drawn me closer and closer to himself, the one who is the Way, the Truth, and The Life. He brings me closer and closer to the presence of his Father and to the heart of God. As I surrender more and more, there is less and less that can hurt me, because I'm learning to disbelieve the things that ain't so that can hurt me and learning simply to trust the one who laid down his life for me.