

About a Girl

I have this feeling that with all the stories about Jesus' healing miracles there is something more than just the healing that we are supposed to notice. The healing thing was something that was just part and parcel of who Jesus was and what he was doing. He did it pretty much everywhere he went and by most accounts it was the healings that really got him noticed by the people. Now don't get me wrong, I'm sure all his parables were pretty neat and got people thinking, but let's face it, the crowds of thousands of people following him around weren't there to learn about sheep and farming and how they're like the kingdom of God, they were there because he could heal people. It was getting to the point where, even when he would go to a new place, the crowds were waiting for him.

Jairus is a desperate man, but also a man of status in his town. He is the one who gets the first crack at Jesus: "help my little daughter, she's dying." No brainer there, Jesus is on his way, but as they go, and the crowd presses in another desperate person reaches out for him, a woman this time, a woman with a hemorrhage that had been going on for twelve years, a woman who had spent up all of her resources to get this problem solved. If you've had health class in seventh grade, you know what the problem here was, and you need to know that, in that culture, at that time, this had serious social implications on top of the suffering of the actual problem. This may have cost her a marriage, it kept her apart from the religious rituals of her people, because blood of any kind made you unclean, it probably made her something of a pariah. Unlike Jairus, she doesn't even dare to ask, she just reaches out and is healed.

Jesus knows, he feels the power go out of him, but he's not angry, he's just curious. What happened, how did it happen, it's not a normal thing, even for him. This miracle seems to have happened without him intending it to happen. This woman steals the healing, and when she is caught she comes in fear and trembling, because everything she believes about the way God works is pretty wrapped up in clean and unclean things, and if the last decade of her illness taught her anything it was that she was pretty obviously unclean. She probably expected Jesus to be outraged that her uncleanness had touched him, which is how most Rabbis would respond. But he's not angry, he tells her to go in peace, because her faith has made her well.

He wasn't worried about what everybody thought about that, he actually seems a little impressed that this woman had the courage to do what she did, keep that in mind, but don't forget there's another story in progress here. Just then the servants from Jairus' house return and tell him that it's too late, his daughter has passed. Jesus says, "Do not fear, only believe." Believe what? I'm sure that Jairus had some level of hope that Jesus could heal his daughter of her sickness, but raising someone from the dead is a whole other can of worms. What, exactly, is this poor guy supposed to believe? He's supposed to believe that Jesus is going to break the mold of what is possible, just like that woman did. He's supposed to believe that the thing he almost doesn't dare hope for is going to come true, that his daughter is not going to be dead.

When they get to Jairus' house, sure enough, mourning rituals have already broken out. A community is grieving for the loss of a child, as all communities would. Jesus interrupts their solemn show of grief with some new information, "she's not dead, only sleeping." The mourners laugh at him, because that's not a thing that happens, people don't come back from the dead. So Jesus sends them away, the crowds have been left behind, all those who don't have reason to believe are put out of the picture, and all that remains are Jesus, his three disciples and the grieving parents. Jesus then says to her, "Talitha cum," Mark records the words in Aramaic, the language that Jesus actually spoke, and you really don't

need me to tell you that they mean, “Little girl, get up.” She does, she’s up, she’s better and she’s hungry, and she’s twelve years old, she has been given back her entire life, her parents have been given back their child and all that she will become, and Jesus tells them not to tell anyone.

Seriously? Don’t tell anyone? Everyone is going to notice that the girl is better! That part isn’t a secret, the secret is that she really was dead, not sleeping. The secret is that Jesus healed her of death, not just of whatever illness killed her. It’s one thing when Jesus can heal incurable and chronic illnesses and disabilities, then the crowds make it difficult for him to go from place to place, imagine what would happen if people thought he could cure death itself. The crowd just can’t be trusted with that information at this point, they would inevitably turn it into some sort of circus, and they would probably use life after death as an excuse to act like boors here and now (imagine religious folk doing that).

There is something else that Jesus heals though, in both of these situations he touches people who have been written off by most of the world. Think back to the woman who had reached the end of her rope and was living in poverty and desperation. What is unspoken is the way that her community had made one of those all too common concessions to what is “necessary.” She was unclean because of an ailment that could not be remedied, and as such, for their own “cleanness” they had to push her to the edges, as they did with lepers and other such “problem people.” She expects the same treatment from Jesus; that religious and righteous determination that her problem is beyond their help and that therefore she must remain shunned. Something in her, and maybe it’s just sheer desperation, has hope that perhaps just a simple touch, even if it is audacious and forbidden, will put her back in connection with something and someone. That is her faith, to see hope beyond all the reasons why not.

That is what Jesus challenges Jairus to “only believe,” believe that the brokenness of his daughter’s death is not a foregone conclusion. Everyone around them is ready to just go on with their system that tries somehow to deal with that tragedy. All the well-meaning neighbors are there to wail and mourn and participate in the rituals of the inevitable, but Jesus challenges them to a throw down, and it is truly that spirit of hopelessness that Jesus is challenging here, in both cases. It is a shame that we so easily lose our faith in the transformative and transcendent power of the Kingdom of Heaven, we fall back so easily into those rituals of the inevitable and become trapped by all the reasons why not. We allow ourselves to be imprisoned by the “economic” realities of the world, which insist that with limited resources we must constrain ourselves to the “clean” and the “possible.” Some people are beyond help, some little girls just have to die, beyond a certain point there’s just nothing to be done.

How do people whose central belief is in a resurrected Jesus slide so effortlessly back into such faithlessness? See what I think Jesus’ miracles show us is that what we think is beyond the reach of the Kingdom of God is actually right in the middle of God’s heart for the world. We have come to believe that these desperate people, people pushed to the edge of things, are like poor little stray kittens that Jesus came to rescue, but actually they are the very center of what Jesus came to do. He criticizes the people at the center, he calls them hypocrites and worse, whitewashed tombs, because they, for all their reasoned religion and ritual practices, simply cannot see that the last will be first and the first will be last. Those of us who hold on to our “necessary” judgments and our inevitable rituals forget that God does not find desperate and unclean people untouchable, and God does not fail to see the value in the life of every little girl. The ones that we are most likely to label “those people,” are the ones that God calls us to show love and mercy. Jesus parables, as well as his miracles should show us that this sort of compassion is not a glitch or some pie in the sky dream, but a very real expectation for the people of

God. Sometimes I think the church forgets this, but we're not dead, only sleeping. We absolutely need to hear Jesus say to us, "Talitha cum."