

Pam Brubaker

Sermon 3/31/2019, Agency as Faith

This Lent we are looking at the “wheat” in Scripture, one question from our Lent theme that caught my attention is, “Which God of scripture will we follow?”

I am a student at Lancaster Theological Seminary, and last term I took a New Testament class, where the major assignment for the class was to take a passage from one of the gospels, and really dig into it using the tools that we have been learning and write a paper on it. I decided on this passage (Mark 5:21-42) because of my daughter. She is 24 year old and she gave me permission to share some of this with you. A few years ago, she got a tattoo reading *Talitha cum* in Aramaic script, and her tattoo is connected to this biblical story where Jesus heals a little girl, who is 12 years old by telling her, “little girl get up” and then healing her. *Talitha Cum* means “little girl get up.” I remember when my daughter came home and told us that she had gotten a tattoo, which was her first and as far as I know is her only tattoo, it was clear to me that this was not an impulsive decision, she had been in a season for some time of transition and transformation, there was a new thing emerging in her. When she was young, I often heard from teachers comments like “she is really cooperative and helpful, very good at following directions. In conversation with her about this, she described her young self as timid and shy. But those descriptors no longer fit like they used to. The new adjectives that would fit now, in this season were words like “strong” and “someone who can speak truth in difficult circumstances, stands up for herself and others who may not have a voice.” In conversation with her, it was clear that there was a spiritual aspect to this; there was an invitation in it, “little girl, get up.” So this was my passageway into looking at this biblical account for this assignment.

This story is part of what scholars call a “Markan sandwich.” The author of the gospel of Mark uses this technique of starting a story, interrupting that story with another one, and then finishing the first. The technical term is ‘intercalation’ which means wrapping one story around another. Scholars suggest that we are invited by this technique to compare and contrast these two miracles stories of Jesus.¹ When I began to study the story of Jesus healing a 12-year-old girl, I found another story tucked in the middle. The first story starts with a synagogue leader, Jairus, whose daughter is very sick, dying, and he begs Jesus to come and heal his daughter. Jesus agrees and they set off. On the way to Jairus’ home, there is an unnamed woman in the crowd following Jesus and she had been bleeding for twelve years. She spent all the money on doctors, but it just got worse. (One scholar suggests that she had at one time likely been a person of some wealth since she was able to see “many physicians” (vs. 5:26), but that wealth is apparently gone now.²) We can assume that her bleeding would have made her infertile, which in this culture would have negative social implications. Another scholar points back to Leviticus 15 and says that her bleeding causes her to be ritual impurity, and anyone who comes into contact with her also would become ritually unclean (Lev 15:19-33).³ This woman touches Jesus, uninvited, apparently without his knowledge. Jesus does not seem to be aware of who touched him but knows that power went out of him. He asks who touched him, and when he doesn’t get an immediate answer, he continues to look around to search. The terrified woman comes forward, falls at Jesus’ feet and tells him “the whole truth” (vs. 33).

¹ Mark Allen Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey, Second Edition*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 150.

² Adela Yarbo Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, edited by Harold W. Attridge, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 280.

³ Pheme Perkins, “Mark.” In *New Testament Articles; Matthew; Mark*. Vol. VIII of *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, edited by Leander E. Keck et al., 586-591, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 587.

In summary: this nameless woman, who was probably poor with the social standing of an outcast and who may have been ritually unclean, meaning her touch contaminates, touches Jesus uninvited and is healed. Jesus does not seem to know what happened. She may have thought she was stealing Jesus' healing powers, and that may have been understood by Jesus and the crowd. (Candida Moss writes a detailed and extensive article saying the medical understandings at the time, this would have likely made Jesus look weak and feminine.)⁴ Multiple other things may have made Jesus look weak: his not knowing what happened, looking like he was the victim of theft, power leaving him without his knowledge. At this point in researching, I kept coming back to expecting Jesus to respond harshly, to rebuke her. Jesus does this with people, he tells them how they are wrong, but this is not the case. Instead the story tells us that Jesus said, "daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your disease." This is a short sentence, but to me, there is a lot packed in there. There are 4 parts of this sentence that struck me:

First: In our New Testament, this unnamed woman is the only individual that Jesus calls by the intimate and honored title of daughter.⁵ The role of family was emphasized and apparently important to Jesus; in Mark 3:31-35, just two chapters previous, Jesus talks about who is his family, "who is my mother, my sister and my brother", and also Mark's Jesus calls God in heaven, "Abba." I am suggesting that calling her daughter is significant. Second: Your faith has made you well. I will come back to that. Third: he also offers her peace, shalom. Fourth, "be healed of your disease. Remember that this woman was healed immediately when

⁴ Candida R. Moss, "The Man with the Flow of Power: Porous Bodies in Mark 5:25-34." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 507-519.

⁵ Robin Gallagher Branch, "Literary Comparisons and Contrasts in Mark 5:21-43", *In die Skriflig* 48(1), Art. # 1799, 9 pages, 2014, 2.

she touched Jesus' cloak; one scholar says that a better translation would be "keep your healing," or "I bless your healing."

I want to come back to the second part: Your faith has made you well. Jesus praises this faith of the previously bleeding, now healed woman, but what constitutes her faith? What is Jesus praising in her? (In her article on this pericope, Robin Gallagher Branch notes that "the miracle stories in Mark focus on faith" and she considers what kind of faith this is. She suggests the possibility that in this case, "it is the faith of one individual for herself..."⁶ alongside with her faith in Jesus.) I am suggesting that Jesus is calling **this** faith: her willingness, as a person of little power, to act to bring about her own healing, her sheer guts and her agency, and together with this, her courage and honesty in telling the whole truth as she comes before Jesus.

This seems to present a unique perspective on Jesus and what he praises and affirms in people, and what he deems "faith." It is a little different that what I have heard, particularly as a woman. I remember receiving an invitation to a Christian women's group whose name was GLOW: Godly Loving Obedient Women. When I mentioned this to my husband, he told me about a Christian's men group he knew of: Men of Iron. These fit the "script," don't they? I even imagined switching them: Godly Loving Obedient Men and Women of Iron. That does not fit the script. And there is a script. In this story, I am talking about three women, (the woman who is bleeding, the 12-year-old girl and shortly I will talk about Peter's mother-in-law) all who all have names, but we don't get to know their names; there is a script. But in this story, some things don't fit, we have a woman who looks strong, and Jesus looks weak. and Jesus doesn't get

⁶ Robin Gallagher Branch, "Literary Comparisons and Contrasts in Mark 5:21-43", 2.

upset by this. Is it possible that in this story, Jesus is flipping the narrative that we hear, where women are supposed to be subservient and men strong?

As Jesus moves forward in this story, remember this is a Markan sandwich, he returns to his earlier mission, where he is on his way to heal a twelve-year-old girl. Jesus chooses to heal her by taking her by the hand, and say, "Little girl, get up!" (vs. 41). What stood out here, was the manner in which Jesus heals this girl, he offers her a hand in her own healing. In order to understand how Jesus heals others, I have made a chart of all the physical healings in Mark's gospel and how they occurred (see Appendix 1). One was similar, where Jesus heals Peter's sick mother-in-law, "He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them." (Mark 1:31). In this case, he did not offer her the same agency as he did for Jairus' daughter, Jesus stood Peter's mother-in-law up and then healed her. There are two other times in Mark's gospel that Jesus offered those he healed some agency in their own healing, one of those times is when he tells a man that his sins are forgiven, and the scribes think this is blasphemous, and in response to this Jesus tells him to pick up his mat, and the other is when the religious leaders are waiting to see if Jesus is going to heal on the Sabbath, and he tells someone to stretch out his hand and the man's hand is healed. But the little girl's healing seems unique in that Jesus seems to invite her to partake in her own healing, and there was no crowd. He offers her agency. And remember that we are invited to compare these stories and understand why they are put together. Is it possible that Jesus was inspired by the unique faith of the hemorrhaging woman, and because of this, he gave the little girl a hand in her own healing?

As I end this message, I have a disclaimer, a concern. I think we live in a world where a lot of people fight for themselves when they already have a lot of power and hurt others who are disempowered. I don't want to be a proponent of that, and I don't think that is Jesus' message, ever. At one point in my life, I needed to claim my own agency, but now I often find myself in the position of someone who has more power than someone else. What I hope and pray for, and dare I say, what I believe that Jesus wants, is for all of us to have what we need and to be empowered for our well-being and healing. Amen.

Appendix 1: Jesus' Healing of those with Physical Sickness in Mark's Gospel

Passage (from Mark)	Who was healed	How they were healed	Any extenuating Circumstances
1:30-31	Peter's mother-in-law	Jesus lifted her up	The disciples told Jesus about her.
1:32-34	Many who were sick	Cured many who were sick with various diseases	
1:40-42	A Leper	Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the leper in response to his statement and said, "I do choose, be made clean."	The leper says, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Jesus is moved with pity, then heals him.
2:3-12	A paralyzed man	Jesus said, "Son, your sins are forgiven," and later, "I say to you, take up your mat and go to your home."	Scribes questioned in their hearts, accusing Jesus of blasphemy, which Jesus knows. Because of this, Jesus tells him to stand up and take up his mat.
3:1-5	A man with a withered hand	Jesus says, "stretch out your hand."	This happened in the context of people watching to see if Jesus would cure on the Sabbath.
5:27-34	Hemorrhaging woman	She touched Jesus' cloak and is healed.	Jesus asks who touched him, the woman confesses it was her.

5:40-42	Twelve-year-old daughter of Jairus	Jesus touches her hand and says, "Little girl, get up."	Jairus had asked Jesus to heal his dying daughter, Jesus comes to house and heals her with few people there.
6:56	The sick lying in marketplaces	They touched the fringe of Jesus' cloak.	They begged to touch the fringe of Jesus' cloak.
7:32-35	A deaf man who had a speech impediment	Jesus put his fingers in the man's ears, and spat and touched his tongue, and said, "Be opened."	They begged Jesus to lay his hands on the man.
8:22-25	A blind man	Jesus put saliva on his eyes which partially healed him. Jesus then laid his hands on his eyes and looked intently.	Some people brought the blind man to Jesus and begged him to touch him.