

Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel

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THIRTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Our Scripture passage comes from the Gospel of Mark 5:21–43. Although this passage contains two separate healing accounts, these miracle stories are closely related and work together to communicate an important message. Common elements in the two miracle stories include the following: Both healings occur for women, both women were deemed “unclean” according to the Jewish purity laws, both are referred to with the title “daughter”, the healing for both is described as a “saving” event, faith is called for in both situations, both involve people falling before Jesus, both involve references to twelve years, touch (human contact with Jesus) is a central element for both accounts, and, finally, what was considered unclean did not contaminate what it touched but was made clean by the power of Jesus. In short, both women are invited into relationship with the Lord. With so many common elements, Mark wants us to see these two healings in relation to each another as complementary manifestations of faith—the faith of those who are healed (saved) and the faith of the community around them.

The first healing takes place in the woman who suffered a hemorrhage for twelve years (Gynecologic bleeding). The Book of Leviticus contains the various purity norms pertaining to such women (see Lev 15:19)—they were deemed “unclean” and anything they touched was unclean. This hemorrhage would have prevented her from having children and could have been grounds for divorce. Indications are that she had no one to care for her because she had to use “her resources” to pay for physicians. She was in a truly desperate situation: physically ill, socially and religiously rejected as “unclean”, nearly impoverished, and alone. She has exhausted every hope that the medical arts and religious practices of her time offered—with no relief. Her only hope is this person named Jesus about whom she has heard minimal information. Regardless of how little information she received about Jesus, she acted on it nonetheless! This entire scene leads to her touching Jesus’ garment. Such an action violated the purity codes of her time and demonstrated her initiative and courage.

We are then told that she said to herself, “If I but touch the tassel of his cloak I will be saved (healed).” It is at this moment that Jesus seeks her out to speak to her. What the Lord wants to give her is more than just physical healing; Jesus wants to give her a relationship with Him (relationship is indicated by the familiar use of the second person singular pronoun “you”). Jesus wants her to know that her healing was not the result of her own cunning but of His grace and her faithful initiative and courage. Her determination led her to overcome the social and religious barriers that would keep her from the Lord. Jesus broke social customs as well by speaking to her in public. Nothing will stop the Lord from offering the gift of relationship to this woman who approached Him in faith. She did not “take” anything from Jesus; she received grace and the Lord led her to Himself. In Mark 3:31–35 we were told that those who approach Jesus in faith will be members of the family of God. Now Jesus calls this woman “daughter”—a term of faith and relationship as a member of God’s family. Her healing may have restored her former life, but Jesus wants to introduce her to new and more abundant life as a disciple.

In response to what has taken place in this woman's life, Jesus can say to her "your faith has saved you". In this scene, Jesus is teaching us something about what it means to be a member of God's family, the Church. In the example of the woman's faith, we are not defined by rules and regulations but by the grace of God and our relationship with Jesus. No one is so unclean that our Lord cannot make them clean. Jesus has nothing to fear from our woundedness—and neither should we as long as we take the initiative to approach Him with determination, honesty, and courage seeking His healing grace. We should also expect that the Lord wants more than simply to be the source of our healing; Jesus wants to enter into a deep relationship with us as He did with this woman. He wants to give us new life and not merely to restore our former life. Every encounter with God's grace is an invitation to this relationship with Jesus.

What have you heard about Jesus that makes you want to meet the Lord, and what keeps you from acting on that desire?

The woman had to overcome the social barriers of her time in order to approach Jesus in public because she was considered "unclean". What are some of the social barriers or expectations of others that can hinder us from following our desire to meet the Lord?

What does courage and initiative look like today in our faith lives?

How has an experience of God's grace initiated for you a deep and life-giving relationship with Jesus?

What is it about this woman's story that most inspires you and why?

For what situation have you spent years of your life trying to overcome, and how can that situation become a motivation leading you to Jesus?

In what ways can people seek the gift of God's grace but then turn away from the invitation to a deep relationship with the Lord?

Jairus, the synagogue leader and father of the ill girl, has been with Jesus the whole time and presumably has seen what took place. Now he will be called to even greater faith. Messengers arrive to inform him that his daughter is no longer sick but is now dead. In response, they encourage him to not "bother" the one they call "the teacher". Jairus knows that Jesus is much more than a teacher and he must make a decision—Does he go against the recommendation of so many people or does he continue to accompany Jesus in an act of trust and confidence? Jesus calls Jairus to choose faith rather than fear and so they arrive together at Jairus' home. As a person of faith, Jairus is asked to enter (with those who believe) into the house with Jesus. Jesus then removes from the house anyone who does not have faith—the mourners. At this point, Jairus has chosen to accept the ridicule and accusations of those closest to him and to persevere in bringing Jesus to his daughter. He rises above these obstacles and his faith is not disappointed. Jesus touches the corpse of the child and in doing so He breaks another purity law (for the prohibitions of anyone except a family member touching a corpse, see Lv. 21:1; or even entering the place where the dead person lies, see Num. 19:11–16). However, it is not Jesus' touch that saves the girl; rather it is His Word when He commands her to "rise". That is the same verb used for the Resurrection. She was not only restored to life but she now shares in the resurrected life of Jesus! Like the woman in the first healing, Jesus is giving to Jairus' daughter more than just restoration to a former way of life; Jesus is giving her a new and abundant life in Him. Jairus demonstrated faith and trust even in the midst of seemingly hopeless situations and went against the recommendations and expectations of others.

The passage ends with Jesus giving a peculiar instruction to those in the house: they are to give the girl something to eat. In order to understand this instruction we have to recall some significant elements of the passage: Jairus chose Jesus over his friends, Jairus and those who believe were inside the home with the Lord, and in that context someone who was previously dead received a sharing in Jesus' resurrected life. All those elements point towards this moment as a teaching for the early Church on what being a disciple means: having faith that chooses Jesus in the face of ridicule and rejection, trusting in the Lord's power to address the most hopeless of situations, and welcoming everyone who has been given a share in Jesus' risen life by feeding them. With this understanding, the food that Jesus instructs them to give is His Word and the Eucharist. This girl, who once was dead and the most unclean of all people (corpse), is now to be an equal in the Christian community because Jesus has touched her. Jesus offers a relationship to her through the disciples who will teach her His Word and share with her our Lord's Eucharist. If it were up to the disciples they would never have touched the girl, but Jesus did and now He commands them to help her in developing her faith life. The girl had neither an idea of what preceded Jesus' grace in her life nor what she was supposed to do with that grace—she had to learn a great deal, and the care the disciples give her after she “rises” at Jesus' command will be instrumental in helping her become a mature disciple. This second story challenges us in our discipleship as members of the larger community. Sometimes we can find it difficult to welcome as brothers and sisters all those whom Jesus has touched. Sometimes, too, we can ignore the responsibility we have to give one another “something to eat” that will nourish their relationship with the Lord; rather, we sometimes think it's their responsibility to feed themselves. Jesus wants our cooperation in helping provide nourishment to those who have recently come to know Him so that they can become mature in their faith as well. Being “touched” by Jesus isn't the goal of a Christian life; it's only the beginning.

How does the faith of Jairus inspire you?

The girl had so much to learn about the Lord after He raised her; In your life who has been touched by the Lord and needs to learn more about Him, and how can you be the one who “gives them something to eat”?

How are parents today ridiculed for going against popular expectations and choosing Jesus for their children rather than the recommendations of the world around them?

The girl received the saving grace of Christ because of the intervention of her father.

Who is an example of such faithful perseverance for you?

What are evangelization ministries today that can bring Jesus to us and us to Jesus so the Lord can touch us and we can gain a greater share in His life and grace?

What opportunities or ministries in our faith community can feed us to help us mature in faith after we have been touched by Jesus?