

“Love Heals”

This is one of my absolute favorite stories in the Bible. There are many reasons for this from the construction of the story, the details, the actions of the people, and of course what it teaches us about God and Jesus. I could easily spend an hour working through this story with you, but do not worry I will keep it to ten minutes . . . or so.

The construction of the story is simple yet adept. We segue seamlessly from the storm on the Sea of Galilee that Jesus calms to landing in Galilee. We have changed sides of the sea from the Gentile side to the Jewish side. While Jesus was met by one person, a demoniac, on the Gentile side here he is met by a crowd. As he exits the boat he is approached by a leader of the synagogue begging for healing for his sick twelve-year-old daughter. Just as we are grabbed by this situation the story is interrupted as we learn about a sick adult woman.

This woman has been struggling with a hemorrhage for twelve years (don't miss the congruence of the girl's age and the women's time of illness and the tribes of Israel). While Jairus is a leader of the town this unnamed woman is something of an outcast. Her hemorrhage makes her ritually unclean and therefore someone to be avoided. Jairus can approach Jesus forthrightly, but she must do it stealthily. Despite their differences, both are in hopeless situations--the child is near death, and the woman out of money and doctors. Yet both possess faith in Jesus. Jairus thinks a traditional laying on of hands will cure his daughter, the woman believes she only needs to touch Jesus' garment to be healed. At this point the tension in the story is high.

When the woman touches Jesus she immediately feels healing just as Jesus immediately feels power going out of him. The disciples are nonplussed by Jesus asking who touched him when he is obviously being jostled by the crowd. The difference to Jesus is being bumped into another versus the intentional touch that draws power from him. But this time Jairus and his concerns have faded as the bleeding it is at the point that woman throws herself on the ground before Jesus just as Jairus did. But instead of asking for a healing she is asking for forgiveness for having taken one. Jesus does not chastise her, but calls her daughter and tells her that her faith has cured her.

The interlude with the woman allows time for the daughter to die and servants to report her death to Jairus and “the Teacher.” It is the announcement of her death that brings us back to the original story that we had lost track of while hearing of the hemorrhaging woman's healing. Like the Lazarus story in Gospel of John her death sets the scene for a more powerful miracle from Jesus.

Despite the servants' entreaties, Jesus insists on seeing the dead child. As they approach the house they encounter mourners wailing over her death. Jesus insists she is not dead but “sleeping.” The faithless mourners “laugh” at Jesus. He sends them away and it is only his inner circle and the parents of the girls who are to witness her resurrection.

After Jesus and the others enter her room there is no special prayer, incantation, or even a laying on of hands (remember when Elijah raises a boy from death he must lay on top of the child revive him). Jesus simply says in Aramaic “Talitha cum” or “little girl get up” just what you might say when waking a child from sleep.

The miracles we witness are similar and different. They both required someone's faith, they both involved women, and they both involved only the merest touch to be effectual. The differences include the leader versus the outcast, the prosperous versus the poor, the public versus the private, and illness versus death.

The beauty of the story's construction, characters, similarities and contrasts can be looked at in isolation, but because this is scripture we know that the story is in service to a goal higher than literary skill and beauty.

Today, this week there are two powerful takeaways from this gospel for me—God's preference for those who society rejects. First, these two unnamed women represent the powerless, the sick, the anonymous, and the marginalized. They are overlooked by society but they are central to God's Kingdom. Indeed, these are the ones that God and Jesus come to empower and to free. In the face of a leader and a man of substance Jesus pays attention to the unnamed and ill woman first. He did not have to attend to her first; after all she was already healed. He could have dragged her along and talked with her on the move while he headed to the leader's home. But he stopped to get to know her and find out how he helped her. While he did attend to the poor and ill woman first, he did not neglect Jairus' request. He went to his daughter and brought her back to life in the face of doubters who moaned and insisted she was dead. God's mercy is not limited to the poor.

This leads me to my second point. Faith in God has the power to heal us and free us. God did not make us for pain, illness, and suffering. God made us for love. When we have faith we can act out of a center that is loving and not fearful. Our faith allows us to give over our cares and our problems to God. But God's response may not always be as transparent as the healings in Mark's Gospel.

A friend of mine, Becca Stevens, is the daughter of a priest who was killed in a car crash not long after her family moved to Nashville. The parish her father served embraced the family in their pain. A leader of that parish also embraced Becca in a different way, becoming her abuser. Becca could have run away from the church and God. Instead, she became a priest herself, and among other ministries she founded one that helps women who have had lives of drug addiction, prostitution, and jail to get off the street and turn their lives around.

There are no instant miracles here—neither for Becca nor for the women she helps. But Becca has found the miracle of healing and has helped others to heal as well. The tagline for the work she does is "Love Heals."

Our faith says love changes everything. If we can embrace that truth and live it as Becca does we can change lives and the trajectory of the world. We can live a mean and angry life that focuses on our pain. We can live the life that says that love is a limited thing not to be shared. Or we can live the Jesus life. The life that proclaims that love only becomes more abundant the more recklessly we give it. In God's Kingdom love is abundant and love is healing. Love is needed everywhere. Let's love your friends and our enemies, let's love the poor and the prosperous, and let's love the immigrant, the ill, the vulnerable, the hopeful and the hopeless. Love everybody. Love heals you and the one you love.

Talitha cum. Rise up your faith is making you whole. Share your love with everyone.