

Sermon on Matthew 9
March 14, 2021
First UCC Northfield
Rev. Lauren Baske Davis

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Matthew 9:18-26

¹⁸ While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue^[a] came in and knelt before him, saying, “My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” ¹⁹ And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. ²⁰ Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, ²¹ for she said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” ²² Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And instantly the woman was made well. ²³ When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, ²⁴ he said, “Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. ²⁵ But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. ²⁶ And the report of this spread throughout that district.

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Sermon

As I mentioned in our newsletter, The Chronicle, this week, the story Lisa just narrated is what we might call a Gospel sandwich. It’s where two stories are interwoven in such a way that each story is reliant on the other to show the deeper meaning.

The Gospel sandwich begins with the story of a powerful leader. Some gospels say he was a religious leader, others insist he was a community leader, but either way he was a known, and probably influential man. In the Gospels of Mark and Luke, his name is Jairus. As we know, anyone who’s named in a gospel story is important. Interesting that Matthew doesn’t give him a name.

Quickly we learn that this man, this powerful man, is powerless to his situation. His daughter has died and he needs Jesus’ help. He kneels at Jesus’ feet and cries, “Come and lay your hand on her and she will live.” So Jesus gets up and follows.

But then this man’s story is suddenly interrupted by another story: a woman who had been hemorrhaging sees Jesus on the way to the man’s home. All of a sudden we’re drawn into her story; bleeding for 12 years. Imagine the isolation—the lack of touch (something we might know something about right now)—the lack of meaningful place in society, the ostracizing, the grief, perhaps depression, and desolation she may have felt. By contrast, she is presented as a powerless, nameless woman who chooses to use any power she has to seek Jesus’ healing.

Just as we are concerned about the man’s young daughter, wondering, “what’s going to happen to her?!” this unnamed woman in the street interrupts the story with her own monologue. “If I could just touch his cloak I’d be made well.” And she touches the fringe. The fringe from his tallit, the prayer shawl Jesus may have worn. She touches the fringe; the part of the shawl with 613 knots to remind him of the 613 laws, created to bring about life giving communities. “If I could just touch his cloak, I’d be made well.” One translation says, “I’d be made whole,” which suggests not just physical healing but a more expansive healing as well.

And when she touches the fringe of his cloak, Jesus stops—despite the fact that he’s on

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the way to the man's daughter—and turns around. Other gospels tell us that, "Jesus felt the power go out of him." Jesus has a sense of what's happened, and he says to her, "Take heart, daughter. Have courage....daughter." Wait. Why did he call her daughter? The man's little daughter is the sick one, but Jesus calls this *woman* daughter. What could this mean?

Instantly, the woman is healed.

And then with no transition, we're back to the first story, where Jesus arrives at the man's home. When he gets there, the funeral songs and wailing have already begun. Jesus tells the crowds that the little girl isn't dead, just sleeping. But the crowds laugh, perhaps bitterly, knowing the reality of death all too well in first century Palestine. Jesus lets them laugh, then takes the girl's hand, she rises to life and is healed.

So, you can see how we have a story within a story, a Gospel sandwich if you will. But why? Yes, the meanings of the stories inform each other, and this is actually a commonly used story-telling tool to drum up the suspense, it's meant to do one more thing: to point us toward the very heart of the story.

And what's the heart of this story? Well, in the scriptures, this reading is 8 verses long. At four verses in, quite literally at the center of the story are the words: "Take heart, daughter. Have courage, daughter."

You see, smack dab in the middle of the story, Jesus gives the woman an identity that supersedes and outlasts any illness – the identity of daughter, child of God, beloved child—in place of the sick-one, the outcast, the hopeless one, the other. The one who scholars believe probably had no other people to advocate for her. No other care, no other support systems in her life to be desperate enough to touch the fringe of Jesus' cloak and believe it could do something. Daughter. The one who though ill for years and years, never let go of the determination that hope and healing could be on the horizon—"If I could just touch the fringe, I'd be made well."

"Your courage has made you well daughter," "take heart," Jesus says, immediately making her family. Acting on her behalf in the same way the powerful man who has just come to plead for his daughter's life has acted. Her healing from a particularly painful isolating ostracizing illness, it's not just about the healing of her body, it is restoring her humanity. So many times, Jesus does this through the gospels. Reminding not just her, but anyone who could hear that this woman has an identity, has dignity, has community, and therefore an active place in society.

So what is the point of splicing this story, *her* story, in between another story about the man and his daughter? Perhaps it's to contrast the power and status that are present in the man's story. She is disproportionately affected by her illness because she is a woman, because it isolates her from society, and she doesn't seem to have a community to advocate for her.

The man, we know, is powerful, but his power can only go so far, because it can't make his daughter well or alive, and it brings him to his knees, as he implores Jesus for help. It's out of his hands. And he realizes that he must let go of his power, seeking out an itinerate rabbi in order to find healing and hope.

It doesn't matter, if we're powerful or have high status, when we experience a crisis.

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Yes, it's true that if one has power and privilege, there are more doors open. But crises like serious illness and death are a leveler or at least a reality check for the powerful. The man's daughter has died, and seemingly nothing can stop that. And with the woman's story, we see that when crisis hits or it can be prolonged, those who are most at the biggest disadvantage are hit the hardest.

If we can't imagine how this plays out in 2021, just this week I contacted Conference Min. Shari Prestemon on behalf of a colleague about vaccines, and as we checked in she remarked that black religious leaders she knows are frustrated that their communities aren't receiving vaccines when they're disproportionately affected by Covid. When we wonder in modern day situations like this what Jesus would do when crisis hits and people are suffering disproportionately, we know from this sandwich story. Jesus would stop in his tracks, and turn around and say, "my beloved child you matter. Have courage, take heart, and let's get that healing done."

Friends, we must remember that those who with power and privilege rarely give it up freely. The man with a dying daughter finds that he'd rather give up his power than let his daughter go, he'd rather get on his knees. As another preacher has said, for this man, "to hold onto [power] would do more harm than giving it up." To hold onto power would do more harm than giving it up.

I wonder if that's where the healing began in this story. As a prominent leader, a powerful figure, perhaps there was healing for the man when he gave up his pride and power by kneeling at Jesus feet, and then by having to wait his turn. When the push came to shove, he gave up some of his power in order to regain his family, gaining restoration of his own, as well as his daughter's.

With great compassion, Jesus followed the very real needs for both of these folks who were from very different social strata. I hope we, too, will care about the things Jesus cared about, being leaders who are willing to follow the need, to hear it and center it, letting our power go for the sake of healing. Jesus shows us that we can be a people who are willing to give up power to center people like the woman here at the center of the gospel. The giving up of power by the powerful, the resourced, the privileged, those for whom society is built, the willingness to lay it down is vital. It's healing. It's liberating. It's restorative. We are not free until all are free. May it be so. Amen.

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For your Sunday listening: Sam Cooke "Touch the Hem of his Garment"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeZVZHKL3eI>

(Thanks to Holly Fischer for reminding me of this song!)