

The Beginning of the Good News

A Study of the Gospel of Mark

The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas
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Life Restored: Mark 5:21-43

Some things to think about...

Unnamed characters in Mark

One of the important themes of the Gospel of Mark is the significance of faith, on the part of everyone who encounters Jesus. Those who oppose him do not see him as God's anointed Messiah, the person who is embodying God's will for justice and salvation in the midst of Rome's oppressive rule over Galilee and Judea. But those who have eyes to see the power of God at work through Jesus are said to have *faith* in him, even in the midst of suffering. Jesus can see that the social patterns of Roman rule are not going to give way to God's justice without violence, and he tries to warn his disciples about his impending arrest. The disciples, however, struggle to maintain their faith when Jesus speaks of the cross. They would rather believe that God will simply crush Rome and put Jesus and his followers in power. In contrast to the disciples' difficulty in reconciling Jesus' messiahship with his suffering, several unnamed characters show the kind of faith that makes them a channel for God's healing power. The woman with the hemorrhage and the desperate parents of the little girl in Mark 5 show us what faith really looks like: total confidence, wholehearted focus on God, steadiness in the face of others' doubt.

"Sandwiches" in Mark

The Gospel of Mark was composed from several decades of the early Christian community's telling and re-telling of the stories of Jesus. Over time, those stories did not wear thin, but rather grew thicker and thicker with meaning. One way that they do this is by how the stories are put in relationship to one other. In Mark, the author often chooses to put one story inside of another, so that each of the two gains in meaning by their common themes. Scholars sometimes call these combinations "sandwiches," because one story (here, the story of the woman with the hemorrhage) becomes the "filling" for the other story (here, the healing of the little girl).

A Woman's Touch

One direction in which some Christians tend to take their reading of this passage exaggerates the uncleanness of the woman with the hemorrhage, and Jesus' breaking of the Torah in touching her. These interpretations are not really consistent with Jewish practice in Jesus' time. For one thing, people living in densely populated towns could hardly avoid speaking with or touching members of the opposite sex on a daily basis. There was no law

against that. The woman's hemorrhage makes her unclean for participation in religious observances and for sexual activity, but not for simple daily tasks, like going to market. Note, too, that it is she who decides to touch Jesus, not Jesus who touches her, and if he should feel that her touch has made him unclean, there are simple remedies for him, such as washing before entering the temple or engaging in a religious duty. The point of the story is most likely the emphasis upon her faith and her restoration, through her healing, as an active participant among the people of God. When Jesus says, "Daughter, your faith has made you well," he effectually pronounces her a full "daughter of the covenant," whose strong faith is an asset to the healing of her whole community. Her restoration to full religious participation is similar to that of the leper in Mark 1:40-45, whom Jesus tells to go to the temple to make a thank offering.

Attending to the Word...

As you read these two stories in Mark 5, take note of all the similarities. For example, the woman has been suffering for twelve years and the little girl is twelve years old. The little girl is the daughter of the leader of the synagogue, and Jesus calls the woman "daughter" when he commends her faith. How do these two stories grow thicker with meaning because they have been placed one inside the other?

As you read the passage, take note of the social station of the various characters: Jairus, the disciples, Jesus, the crowd, physicians, members of Jairus' household, the mourners, Jairus' wife, their daughter. How does Jesus move about among all of these people? Where does he focus his attention? How do the disciples relate to the social station of the others, as best you can tell?

Next, pay attention to each character's relationship to time. Who is most concerned about time? Who is least concerned about time? How has time affected the woman with the hemorrhage and the little girl?

Imagine that you are Peter or James or John, who get to witness both events. What do you learn about faith by witnessing the healings of the woman and the little girl? How do you feel, moment by moment, as the two stories unfold? How are you different because of what you have been a part of?

Making the Word your own...

In this story, Jesus' perception of time and his use of time are very different from those of the people around him. What challenges do you face in trying to emulate his non-anxious use of time? Can you tell a story about an experience of time that was different from the ordinary?

The two stories portray the faith of people at the end of all their resources. What might be some ways to maintain a strong faith when things are going as usual?