

"Two Daughters"

Psalm 130; Mark 5: 21-43
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The Rev. Dr. Andrew McDonald
The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Thirteen Sunday in Ordinary Time

This passage from Mark contains Story within a story. One story is interrupted by another story. It is a very intentional piece of writing. The Inner story is there to interpret the outer story. Within the stories, there are very important parallels.

In studying it, I am reminded that one size does not fit all. This is a difficult passage for me and for some others who have lost loved ones unexpectedly.

For some, their Word from the Lord comes from another story. For those good people, I hope I don't say something unnecessarily painful. I try to be sensitive to these issues. If this interpretation does not work, please feel free to look elsewhere in the Bible for passages that will be more helpful.

For others, including me, struggling through this passage has revealed itself to be a story of great hope.

There is a woman. She is an alien. An Outsider. She has had some sort of hemorrhage: a flow of blood: 12 years.

In the law of the faithful, according to the book of Leviticus, chapter 12,

In the list of abominations, she is ritually unclean. It is against the law for a woman to touch a man. It is against the law for aliens to mingle with the faithful. It is against the law to touch someone who has a flow of blood. It is unclean. When you count them up, this woman is just a whole bucket of abominations.

No one had touched her in 12 years. Imagine what it is like to have no one touch you for 12 years. Imagine the loneliness. The alienation. The aloneness.

It is a sort of living death.

And along comes Jesus. There is something about Jesus: his words? His charisma? His reputation? His person? Something about Jesus inspires her to reach out and touch him, even just his coat.

It's against the law. It's against the rules. It's against their religion.

Nevertheless -- Jesus inspires her: to live outside the law, to break the rules, to go beyond their religion. She does it secretly, thinking no one will notice.

Jesus notices. It does not take magic to feel when someone is touching you for a different reason. Jesus senses that this touch was different. He turns to look for that person.

She is afraid at first to speak up. But she has made contact with Jesus: and it was healing. Immediately the flow of blood stopped; she felt herself healed.

She falls down at the feet of Jesus, Jesus raises her up.

Jesus raises her: out of her exile, into a different life. Jesus raises her: To a new life. He addresses her: Not as stranger, not as woman. He calls her: Daughter. After being such an untouchable, he brings her into a new relationship. Jesus redefines her: Whose is she? Jesus calls her daughter.

As if she were in a new family. Maybe God is her Parent? Maybe Jesus is her parent? Whatever it is: she is not a bucket of abominations any longer. She is not a stranger, not an outsider. She is family. She has experienced anew the embrace of the family.

She talks to Jesus, and with his words, he brings her into a new relationship

She steps into a new world. From exile to family. From abomination to relation.

From aloneness to being home. That is the interior story.

Now let that interior story inform the other story. The harder story. The hardest story of all.

There is a leader of the Synagogue. In his role as religious leader, he has to uphold the laws. It is his job. It is his role. It is his identity. He is the one who has to touch no one and nothing that is unclean.

It is his job, his role, his identity.

The leader of the Synagogue was not allowed to be associated with death.

He had to be outside the house. He could not take care of his little one. She is unclean. He could not mourn her loss.

Imagine: his aloneness, isolation, alienation.

Jesus touches the man, and his wife. Jesus takes them by the hand: leads him into where the child is. Everyone else is mourning and wailing.

When Jesus says: She is only sleeping: they ridicule him.

He says to the parents: Do not fear. Only believe. No one else is allowed in:

Jesus leads them into where they were not supposed to go.

He takes the little girl by the hand: You are not supposed to touch someone who is dead: Jesus takes the uncleanness on himself.

He allows no one else in. They would not understand.

They would not perceive.

He takes the little girl by the hand. He talks to her. He tells her to wake up.

Who is there to witness? Only the parents, and three disciples. The three Jesus took up on the mountaintop to the transformation, where Jesus meets Moses and Elijah, who were supposed to be dead, but in the presence of Jesus, they are alive and talk with him. When the transfiguration is over, Jesus tells the three disciples the same words he tells to the parents: Tell no one. It is only later that they will be ready to hear.

The other people would not understand. They would not perceive the miracle.

Jesus holds out a new reality: She is not dead. She is sleeping. Jesus can wake her. This is the Lord of life. It is eternal life. But some part of that eternal life may be known now. Even experienced. It is eternal life: of which we may grasp glimpses.

Frederick Buechner wrote in his autobiography of how one Saturday morning when he was very young, He and his brother were playing with toys on bedroom floor. Their father cracked the door and looked in on them. Then he left silently, Went into the garage, and closed the door. That was the end of his father.

No one ever mentioned it. For 20 years they barely talked of it. Imagine the isolation. The alienation.

It's like not being touched for 20 years.

Buechner uses a phrase: Here and there..... Now and then. There are glimpses.

Glimpses of the life to come: here and there... now and then.

Years later he is teaching some bored teenagers about Shakespeare. They are not getting it. He and everyone else is bored. A buzzing bee on window.

Tapping branches on the windowpane.

Then one Young girl sees the truth. Moment: she was radiant. The bee on the window pane, the twig tapping on the window, the look on the young girls face. It was a moment, filled with radiance.

Transcendence. A Glimpse of heaven.

Then it went back to being normal. But Buechner saw it. He saw it.

Here and there, now and then. A glimpse of eternity.

In the gospel of Mark, you get the message from the unclean woman:

Jesus wants us to reach out and touch him as he passes by.

From the parents of the little girl: Jesus wants to take us by the hand,

Out of the valley of the shadow of death, in into real life.

To hear Jesus whisper, "They are only sleeping. Arise."

Here and there. Now and then. Just for a moment, we see. We see.

Jesus calls the woman: daughter. The man calls the girl: daughter.

2 daughters: but Jesus redefines both of them.

These two are now clearly daughters of God who live in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus says: "Do not fear. Only believe." What does it mean to believe?

Not a system of laws and doctrines. Not a fact. Belief is about what you perceive to be trustworthy. What is most real? Where do you place your Ultimate Trust?

Jesus gives us an Invitation to see, through eyes of faith, God has claimed us as loved ones: Daughter. Son. We are held in the loving arms of God.

Here and there. Now and then. I see it.

Gene Fowler tells about a movie a few years ago called *The Visitor*. It was the story of a college professor who had become a widower. In the opening scene, he is taking piano lessons. He is trying to imitate his wife's talent. Unfortunately, he has none of her talent. On the way out the door, the piano teacher offers

to buy his piano if he should want to sell it. He has lost all interest at work. But a young colleague convinces him to put his famous name on a paper that the young man had written, so he agrees.

When it comes time to present the paper in New York the young man is not able to attend the conference. So the older man goes. He enters a small apartment that he owned there but rarely went to, only to discover that the unscrupulous building superintendent had rented it to some squatters.

They quickly gather their few goods and head for the street. He runs after them and invites them to stay until they find a place to live. The two are two illegal immigrants. The young woman is from Africa, the young man fled from Syria as his father had written against the government. The young man is a drummer. African style: just your hands, no drumsticks. They become friends. The professor goes with the young man, and drums with him in his bands.

Tragedy comes, the young man is deported. His mother comes to help him, and the professor develops a relationship with her also. But she soon has to leave also, to go care for her son.

Even though they are gone, the professor has found a new family. New purpose in life. He never learned to play the piano. But the last scene is the professor taking his drum and playing it in the subway station. His face is full of life.

Fowler says about this man: It is as if he were playing a psalm of praise.

With every beat of the drum, it was as if he were saying,

"Thank you Lord, for hearing my prayer,

for help during the darkness of the past few years;

for I can walk again in the light of love.

Thank you Lord, for my wife,

and the opportunity for us to make a new life together.

I promise you that I will be grateful to you always

for the unfolding of our marriage relationship during the years ahead,

and I will share my admiration for you to all who will listen.

Remember, his wife had died; but the man experienced it as a new way of being in relationship with her. She lives in his memory. She lives in the kingdom of God.

Jesus says to the woman: "Your faith has made you well." Faith: that in which we place our deepest trust. What do you trust most deeply?

Faith that inspires you to see Jesus as touchable, takes you to a new place.

It takes you to a new life.

The profound German theologian Hans Kung writes in his book, *Eternal Life?*:

"It is a question of the ineffable, incomprehensible, unfathomable God. And only in so far as the end, but also the center and particularly the beginning of the world of human beings have to do with this great alpha and omega, the center of centers, do they too deserve to be described as a mystery. And because in

my decision I touch upon this one mystery, this decision too will never be a decision of pure reason, but the decision of my own self, as a whole person. A venture of faith, akin to the venture of love. p. 228

Kung is saying: We can't prove that God exists. And no one can prove that God does not exist. So the Question is: in what do you trust? As for me, here and there, now and then I see it. Jesus reveals in the most compelling ways the kingdom of heaven which he offers. In so doing, Jesus confronts death itself.

In faith, we see it: In the presence of Jesus, and under his authority, death itself is but sleep. Even after death itself, it is not too late to hope.

Shakespeare gives us that sense of "here and there, now and then" in Taliban's speech in *The Tempest*:

Be not afraid, the Isle is full of noises,

Sounds and sweet airs that give delight, and hurt not.

Sometimes, a thousand twangling instruments

Will hum about mine ears, and sometimes voices

That if I then had waked after long sleep

Will make me sleep again, and then in dreaming,

The clouds me thought would open and show riches

Ready to drop upon me,

That when I wake

I cried

To dream again.

Be not afraid. Little girl, awake.

Amen.

Annotated Sources:

Hans Kung's book *Eternal Life?* (Doubleday Publishers) wrestles with the topic of eternal life with profound theological insight. Kung explores direct questions and challenges to Christian understandings, and answers with insight and faithfulness.

Frederick Buechner in his autobiographies, *The Sacred Journey* and *Now & Then* (Harper & Row Publisher) gives a personal reflection on his father's death and the faith that carried Beuchner through his life. It is a touching personal story.

Gene Fowler in his book, *The Ministry of Lament: Caring for the Bereaved*, gives a profound Christian approach to caring for those who have gone through loss. This book deals with the fact that people grieve differently, and far longer than "the clinical model" accounts for. Fowler uses the Psalms as a way to help people live and express the profound depths and the amazing heights experienced by Christians in the face of death.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, Yale professor of philosophical theology, shares his grief in *Lament for a Son* (Eerdmans Publishing.) One walks with him in his journey of grief, sometimes where the feelings are so deep, he has only written one paragraph in a chapter. For those who grieve, when you read this book, you may feel that you do not grieve alone. Wolterstorff not only grieves, but seeks to do so redemptively.

For those in the congregation who have an experience of grief or loss, please remember, you are not alone. In the grace of the Lord Jesus, we have been given one another. If it would be helpful, please feel free to reach out to one of the pastors or to a Stephen Minister, as we seek to love and heal one another. – Rev. Andrew McDonald.