

Jesus the Healer



*"Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live."
"If I but touch his clothes, I shall be made well."*

(Mark 5:23,28)

I hope you're hungry for Good News this morning, because on the menu is a tasty Markan sandwich! This is the descriptive term given by nerdy biblical scholars to Mark's fondness for telling a story inside another story. And today's Gospel about faith in Christ's healing power is an example. On the outside is the story of Jairus and his daughter, while the middle of the sandwich is the story about the woman suffering from hemorrhages.

Scholars occasionally call out Mark's Gospel for being written in a rough and ready style. For me, Mark is a bit like Picasso's famously simple drawings. The text may seem spare, but that just means nothing is wasted. Every word, sentence and literary device make some inspired point that collectively, becomes the Good News of Jesus Christ.



This is especially the case in today's Gospel, which is the only instance of a Markan sandwich that is repeated in both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels. Like any good sandwich, it takes the bread and the lunch meat together to make a savory whole. So let's dive in.

On their face, both stories are about faith and healing. The synagogue official's faith in Jesus leads to the raising of his daughter. The bleeding woman's faith leads to her being cured. So far so good. Now, let's look deeper.

In the outer story, Jairus is an official of the synagogue, kind of like the warden of a church. He's a leader of the community. Yet this privileged position cannot save his daughter or save him from not only her loss but the loss of progeny through her.

In the inner story, the woman's constant menstrual bleeding places her in an ongoing state of ritual impurity under Jewish law. She's a victim of the unintended consequences of Torah. She has also become impoverished paying for questionable cures. Diseased, poor and unclean, she is on the fringe of the same community Jairus is at the center of.

At this point, our two stories begin to offer a wider message. Christ's healing grace crosses all boundaries of social status and position. The common denominator is faith in Jesus.

But wait, there's more. We learn that Jairus' daughter is twelve years old. This is the only time that Mark notes someone's age. In addition, the woman has been suffering with her blood flow for twelve years. In Markan style, these numbers are not a coincidence. Twelve represents all the tribes of Israel. (Think the twelve apostles, or the twelve baskets of food left after the feeding of the five thousand.) These simple details

open up the Gospel even further. Perhaps Mark is also saying something about Jesus and Israel itself!

And there is still more. At twelve, the little girl is on the edge of puberty, and according to Jewish custom, is now of marriageable age. Awakened by Jesus thanks to the faith of the synagogue leader, she now can go on to be married, have children and assure the family's future. The woman with the flow of blood has almost certainly not been able to enjoy the normal life of procreating and rearing children because of her condition. Restored to wholeness by her faith in Jesus, she becomes reconciled as a fruitful member of the community. Our Markan sandwich is now taking shape as a larger parable of the healing, restoration and future of Israel through faith in Jesus Christ.

There is poetry in Mark's recounting of Jesus healing a faithful daughter of Israel and the faithful Jewish leader's daughter. In our brief investigation, we can sense a richness, harmony and truth in layers both literal and allegorical. There's a beauty and fullness that expository prose cannot match. It is a work of the Holy Spirit.

That said, we like the disciples, can't help but seek a clearer explanation of Jesus' message in these acts of healing. I offer one possible understanding in the hope that the Spirit may guide us to the full flower of the Good News in this reading.

Imagine the inner layer of the sandwich as the people of Israel, and the outer layer the Jewish leadership charged with guiding them to the promises assured to Abraham. The Law, ossified in a misguided attempt to save the nation over its long history of oppression, had become a source of suffering and brokenness in a way never intended by Moses. Rather than Israel becoming exceedingly fruitful (*Genesis 17:6*), as numerous as the stars of heaven (*Genesis 22:17*), and a blessing to all the families of the earth (*Genesis 12:3*), its life blood is flowing from it. No worldly cure seems to have helped. Impoverished and living on the margins of the world, Israel's people suffer and its leadership sees no future. Israel is dying.

But if Israel will only turn toward Jesus, if its people will but touch his cloak in faith, if its leaders will only fall at his feet, Christ will restore Israel to health and wholeness, and the nation will awaken to a bright and hopeful future. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham, a covenant that saves all the nations by Israel's blessing.

From the time of his promise to Abraham, God has remained faithful. In Lamentations, a work composed in response to another near death moment, the Babylonian exile, we hear that:

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;*

*they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22-23)*

In the fullness of time, God sent us a Messiah. Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is God's faithfulness. Like the protagonists of today's Gospel, our part is to respond to God's faithfulness by having faith in Jesus Christ and his healing grace. Our part is to

take up our cross and follow him. Our part is to walk Christ's path of total devotion to God and love of neighbor, to bring his justice and mercy to heal a bleeding world.

I hope that this little Markan sandwich has whetted your appetite for more delectables from the Gospel banquet table. Last Wednesday, the usual jamming and office group were in the parish hall chatting about this Sunday's Gospel. Someone remarked how much they liked St. Mark. (Of course, this had nothing to do with his being our patron.)

In our recent bible studies, I'm learning that our parish enjoys exploring the Bible. In the next few weeks, we'll be spending some time with a bit more of Mark's Gospel. I invite you to bring your heart for Scripture to these passages and the surrounding readings. One of the ways we respond to God's faithfulness is by being faithful to his Word. May the Holy Spirit be our guide as we explore together the full flower of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

And may Jesus, our healer and the healer of the nations, be praised. Amen.