

UNCLEAN
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Mark 5: 21-43

In this passage from the gospel of Mark, we hear the story of two women who are brought back to life and health by Jesus. Biblical commentators refer to the technique used here as “sandwiching.” (Really, I ran into this term over and over again in researching this story.) The story starts with Jairus, the head of a synagogue, who requests of Jesus to come with him to see and lay healing hands upon his little girl, whom, he says, is close to death. But before Jesus can get there, he has another request. Among the many hands upon Jesus as he makes his way down the crowded street, he feels one in particular, a touch of special urgency perhaps. This is a woman who has been hemorrhaging, or, as we read just now, has had a flow of blood for twelve years. She had gone to many doctors, but had gotten no better. (This sounds kind of familiar, doesn’t it.) She touches Jesus’ garments and immediately, she feels that the flow of blood inside her has dried up... she has been cured. And, indeed, Jesus feels that his healing power has been used, and turns to see who has touched him thus. His disciples are impatient - you cannot know who has touched you because there are so many of them. But the woman falls down before Jesus and he tells her, that her faith has healed her. The healing comes from her, from her own belief. Well, that’s the sandwich part. Then we go back to the little girl. Someone comes from Jairus’ house and tells him that his daughter is dead, that he need not bother bringing Jesus to the house. But Jesus tells him not to worry, but only to believe. He goes to the house with three of the disciples and sends all the weepers and wailers away except for the mother and the father. He goes to where the little girl is lying dead in her bed and

takes her by the hand and tells her to arise. “Tal’i-tha, cu mi.” “Little girl, I say to you, arise.” And we are told that she gets up and walks to Jesus, for, the Scripture says, she is 12 years old. And the passage ends, I was glad to see, by Jesus saying that she should be given something to eat.

I want to point out to you that this Aramaic phrase, “Talitha cumi,” has a certain resonance all of its own. It is used in *The Brothers Karamazov* in a portion of the novel touching upon the grand Inquisitor, and, because of that, it is also the name of the 24th episode of *X Men*. I’ll bet you didn’t know that.

The two females in this sandwiched story are linked in their restoration to health by Jesus, and we’ll talk more about that later. There are other links too. They are both considered “unclean”, the little girl because she is dead, and the woman because she is menstruating. Unclean in ancient times was a very unfortunate thing to be for it meant that you were not to be touched, not to be associated with, to be shunned. And there were three particular conditions that excluded the infected person from society. These were leprosy, uncleanness caused by bodily discharges, and impurity resulting from contact with the dead (Num. 5:2-4).

Jesus is doing something reckless by touching these unclean women, and it is the touch, that seems to carry the power of regeneration. It is almost as though by crossing the breach, by building the bridge, by extending the hand, those that are frightening in their infirmity can be made whole and productive again.

In reading various things about this passage in Scripture, I came across a poem written about how the ritual of the Passing of the Peace had changed things for one church congregant. These are some lines from Amy Weems’ poem:

“What is all this touching in church?

It used to be a person could come to church and sit in the pew
and not be bothered by all this friendliness
and certainly not by touching....

Now I have to get involved.

Now I have to suffer when this community suffers.

Now I have to be more than a person coming to observe a service....

"Pass the peace."

"The peace of God be with you." "And with you."

And mean it.

Lord, I can't resist meaning it!...

All this touching in church -- Lord, it's changing me!"*

So it is the touch that brought both of these women back, that made them safe for community again. But other things unite them too. They are both “daughters”, the girl for Jairus and the woman is addressed by Jesus as “daughter.” The fact that they are both “daughters” relates them to one another in the story, and it also challenges their outcast status. How can they be unsafe for the community if they are cherished by the head of the synagogue and by Jesus, the teacher. It is part of Jesus’ revolution that he can show the community how nonsensical their responses might be.

Also, there is the time of 12 years. The woman has been bleeding for twelve years, and the little girl is twelve years old. Twelve years is significant in Biblical

history, in governments of ancient times, in the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles, in the traditions of the Hindu Veda, it is seen as a perfect number, a multiple of three. More importantly, probably for this story, is that the little girl's age means that she is at the cusp of marriageability, thus able to produce children of her own and renew her people. The woman, after 12 years of trial will now herself be able to conceive and bear children as well. It is only because they were touched, because they became unafraid, because others became unafraid of them, that they were made able once again to bring forth life. Bringing forth children was seen in Judaism as an imitation of the life-giving power of God and a fulfillment of the command to make the earth fruitful.

Now, let us move to the terrible events in Charleston, S. Carolina. Dylann Roof killed 9 people in the Emanuel AME Church after he had been sitting with them for an hour at Bible study. It seems that he killed them because they were black, African American. After the killings and after Dylann Roof was arrested and put in jail, some of the families of some of the victims went to the courthouse for the bond hearing. They stood in front of him and addressed him and told him that although he had taken away the people that they had loved, they were there to tell him that they forgave him, that they prayed to God to have mercy on him, and finally that as one member of the groups says, "I hope that you will take this opportunity to repent, to confess, to give your life to Christ so that he can change you." No one was able to touch him, of course, because he was a prisoner, and stood aloof on a stand, in handcuffs.

I could not bear to listen to or watch this meeting when I first heard of it, could not imagine forgiveness for this act, especially from the people who perhaps suffered the most from it. I and many, many people were and are filled with anger and horror and felt that we could never soften our voices or our hearts, reach out our

hands to touch with gentleness one who seemed so barbarian in his behavior and demeanor. And yet, look who it is who has done that. The ones hurt most by it. They reached across the chasm, crossing the breach, building the bridge, just as Jesus did.

And, I believe that it is in the story from Mark about the unclean women that we can perhaps learn why. Now I am not going to pretend to understand why it is that Dylann Roof did what he did though I am sure that we could talk a long time about that. Our readings today have led us to a discussion of touching, and that it is only because the women were touched and became unafraid that they can then become fruitful members of society. To touch someone, to make them understand that everything could be alright, that you can be a part of humankind, that you do not have to hold yourself apart, that is what it is to make a person whole.

That is what it seems to me that these remarkably large souled people from the Emanuel AME Church were trying to extend to Dylann Roof - they were trying to make him whole with their forgiveness. As they, of course, will know it is not a one sided thing, this extension of forgiveness, for he has to be able to accept it too and only then will he be able to start to become someone capable of walking on the road of humanity once more. But that is a long, long story.

Amazing Grace!

*Ann Weems in *Reaching for Rainbows*, 1980, Westminster Press