

UNCLEAN

July 1, 2012
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 him 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 by their infirmity can be made whole and productive again

In reading various things about this passage in Scripture, I came across a poem that someone had written about how the ritual of the Passing of the Peace had changed things for one 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.

Nora Ephron died this week. Nope, this is not a digression. She was born the same year that I was and for many of those years she has represented the voice that made me and many of my friends unafraid. She talked of women in our life and times with familiarity, irony, wit, and belly laugh humor. Whether it was about the oddities of love and marriage, of sex, of the working life, of aging... no matter the subject, you always felt that you knew of what she spoke, that she and you had been in the same place, suffered the same ridiculousness, and managed somehow to find your way through it. Now I do not mean to say that Nora Ephron was like Jesus, and certainly she would have been the first to find that hilariously off the mark, but there is something in the way that she made things acceptable that is reminiscent of what Jesus did with the unclean women. Nora let us know that the off-the-wall things that happened to women in the new climate of liberation and maybe post-liberation were not only often perplexing, sometimes funny, sometimes impossibly irritating, but also things that were shared by many of us. Whether it was small breasts, faked orgasms or crepey necks, she made everything a recognizable foible and consequently

acceptable. Because Nora wrote of these things, told what had happened to her, the rest of us knew that it was part of a shared experience. We knew that we were not alone, not out of sink with the rest of the world, that if we could be brave and funny like Nora, we would come through just fine.

It was actually my son, Andrew, who, when I told him the other day that I had to write a sermon, suggested that I make it about Nora Ephron. He didn't know what the text was - he just thought it would be appropriate for me to talk about Nora. I had told my friends that I felt lonely when Nora died, a feeling akin to "who will be my advocate now?" Just so, Jesus was an advocate for the unclean women and for the many other characters that are depicted in the gospel whom he transforms - he heals them and brings them back to life, but more importantly for the society he show how they must be touched, not shunned. I think now that it's kind of wonderful that the story of Jesus and the unclean women could lead to an understanding of what made Nora Ephron great. It is what makes all these Biblical stories so powerful - we can always find something in them that is applicable, illuminating for the life that we are living today.

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