

A tale of 2 women: some first century vital statistics

Mark 5: 21-43

Jenny Duke and I spent Monday morning in a classroom full of 11-year-olds... the year 6 children at Duxford school... so this story about an unnamed pre-teen – a 12-year-old girl – really resonated with me as I read it through the week...

The year 6 children we met were good and ready for the new challenge of secondary school. In Jesus' time, however, a girl of around 12 would have been heading in the direction of adult life via a very different route. She may well have been betrothed – engaged, even though the marriage itself could have been some way off.... She may well have already taken up a range of domestic duties... becoming a key player in her household.... In some senses (though not all) she was becoming a grownup.

But that's not the case for this unnamed daughter of the synagogue leader, Jairus, who is the focus of today's reading from Mark's gospel. Instead, she's gravely ill... so ill that Jairus has literally thrown himself in Jesus' path, begging for help... Who knows what he thought of Jesus... who knows what he expected... I think we can see that he had some hope, however... perhaps simply because all other sources of hope were gone...

For 12 years Jairus and the girl's mother have treasured this child... (seen her through the childhood illnesses and the many other threats present in that time of high child mortality) ... Now they are facing the possibility of having to let her go...

Meanwhile, those same 12 years have passed very differently for another unnamed woman... the woman who causes Jesus to stop on his way to Jairus' house... While the synagogue leader and his family may have been marking the milestones, looking forward to when their daughter grew up, this woman has spent those years and all her money looking for a cure.... Of course, some of the woman's story is rooted in the limits of first century medicine. Notice how the gospel writer says she had *endured* a lot under physicians...it's essentially the same word that Jesus uses to describe what will later happen to him... the word to *suffer*... that and the expense involved – *all she had* - doesn't sound like a good review of the services she had received!

Yet even though the circumstances are so very different to our own, I think we can probably connect with the woman's particular kind of desperation... whether it's about our health or other issues in our lives (perhaps being stuck in the wrong job... or an unhappy relationship... or financial difficulties), we may be reminded of times when we've been faced with a situation where the options seem horribly limited... where the doors are shutting rather than opening...

For Jairus' 12-year-old daughter, it seems that life is ending just as her horizons should be expanding... for the older woman, desperation comes after 12 hard years of searching.... For both women, things are closing down...

I think it helps to listen carefully when in the gospels we (as it were) eavesdrop on what people say to themselves... it's often revealing at lots of levels. So, in this story we get

to hear the woman think: *If I but touch his clothes I will be made well ...* what motivates that? It could be occasioned by the type of illness and possible associations of shame ... (the gospel writer is probably male and definitely not specific). It could be a superstitious thing...perhaps she thought Jesus may be so special that touching even the hem of his clothing could be enough to effect a cure? It could be about a kind of low self-esteem that says I'm not important enough to command Jesus' attention in the way that someone like Jairus can...? We don't know... but touch is key...

Especially when you notice that as he first accosts Jesus, Jairus asks for something quite similar: he, too, asks for touch: *Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.*

The (healing) miracles of Jesus are about showing who Jesus is... but what does the element of touch tell us? It's a relatively unusual thing in the Bible – touch was more often used to signify a transfer of power (e.g. Moses to Joshua) or formally in ceremonies like ordination, as we still do today.

And in the wider culture of Jesus' time, though there was a bit of healing by touch, it was usually what a god or (very occasionally) an emperor did. And often it involved certain special rituals...

The gospels don't show Jesus like this – it's simply touch, nothing else ... But why? Perhaps this is primarily about connection, relationship? Jesus, who can by speech alone command the wind and waves and bring healing (as in the long distance healing of the centurion's servant), here comes close enough to touch or be touched by someone... takes the girl's hand as he tells her to get up... turns questioningly as the woman touches him... as if some life force has been transferred between them... like ET's glowing finger connecting with Elliot in the final scene of the movie...(you know... ouch). A life force that comes from him rather than someone or something else. A life force that gets no less in him, even as it flows into someone else...

A Rabbinic writer closer to the time of Jesus than the time of Spielberg described this quality of touch *as one kindling a light with a light* (rabbinic saying re Moses conferring leadership on Joshua).

Here two powerful connections, life-changing, life-giving connections are made. I wonder about the connections we make with others. How do we echo in our lives that focused, loving attention that Jesus – here and elsewhere in the gospels -gives to the people he encounters. As we see from this woman's story, some of Jesus' meetings – and ours- can be accidental, fleeting... are we ready with our time and attention for others, or too focused on what we want to do to notice and be available?

Lastly, these two encounters bring life... literally to Jairus' daughter, and for the woman who interrupts the journey, rescue from an impaired, incomplete existence... a restoration to community... In his final words to the woman, Jesus calls her *daughter*.... She has family now, just like Jairus' little girl...

Then, astonishingly, when he enters the synagogue leader's house and comes into the girl's room, Jesus says to her *get up* – or *arise* – the very thing that he – in the silent hours of Easter morning – will himself do – get up, leave the tomb, put aside the cloths he was wrapped in – and live. The core of Christian hope ... is that death is not the last thing, that death is defeated..... Today, as we say the creed, as we share in Holy Communion – we are reminded about that great hope of life beyond this life...

Those two hopes - the promise of real life now and the hope of life beyond this life – this is what we live by and live for...