

“If I just have enough faith, my diabetes will go away.” “If I pray hard enough, God will take away my son’s bipolar disorder.” “If I believe what the Bible tells me strongly enough, my husband’s cancer will be cured.” Stories of miraculous healing can lead us down paths like this, and I have seen some amazing recoveries that I cannot explain. But we all know—don’t we?—that some people stay sick or die no matter what we believe or how hard we pray.

Jesus brought Jairus’ daughter back from a deathly sleep, but countless other children die. Jesus restored a desperate but faithful woman to health, but there are other equally desperate and faithful people who are not restored to health. So why do we pray for healing our loved ones? In a few minutes, I will offer to lay hands on people who want healing and I will anoint them with oil, but what does it mean to ask for healing? Well, Mark’s Gospel intertwines these two stories to help us to see the miraculous and life-giving good news of this Jesus.

When I was a hospital chaplain, I can’t tell you how many times I saw the difference between healing and curing. I saw people die who were healed and I saw people live who were not healed. Think of it like this: a body part or system can have a disease or a malfunction and the person has an experience of that disease or malfunction. Sometimes interventions – medical, chemical, mechanical and even prayer – can overcome the disease. That’s part of a *cure*. But the person’s experience of the illness is transformed only by engaging the whole person – body, mind and spirit. In other words, a person can be cured but not healed; healed, but not cured.

*Healing* is a return to the wholeness of God. Healing comes as God as we allow God to draw us into deeper intimate relationship with God’s self. Healing, whether we are cured or not, is how God makes us more human, shaping us in relation to others through acceptance, intimacy and touch.

That’s the miracle that can escape our attention in Mark’s story—actually two stories that are mirror images of each other, each of which sheds light on the meaning of the other. Mark uses this bracketing technique elsewhere, but this is the only place in the Gospels where one healing is purposefully and inseparably braided with another, so that they become one story.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was inspired by a sermon delivered at a gathering of CWS leadership given by Dr. Charles Amjad-Ali, an ordained presbyter of the Church of Pakistan.

Jesus has been driven back from the Gentile side of the Galilee to the Jewish shore and our story begins at the *very center* of Jewish society. Jairus is a powerful, upper-class Jewish leader, and he follows the socially accepted procedure for making a request. He speaks man-to-man with Jesus on behalf of his daughter. To bow in making the request would have been proper protocol, but Jairus falls to his knees before Jesus, symbolically worshipping him. This move shows how extremely desperate he had become. He is almost to the point of violating the commandments. Without a word, Jesus starts out with Jairus to the house, with the crowd following along.

And then something happens. Into the context of people at the center of acceptable Jewish society, a story of people at the margins intrudes and pushes the center to the edges. The outsider story comes to the center and the insider story moves out of the way.

With the introduction of the woman with hemorrhages, the storytelling changes dramatically: Unlike the brief introduction of Jairus, Mark now offers background information and sharply articulated details. She had been living with a flow of blood for 12 years. If, as it is commonly held, her bleeding was menstrual, it means she was childless, and so she had no status in the community and no acceptable means of support in her future. Her bleeding made her ritually impure, so she had been excluded from communal life and worship for 12 years. She suffered at the hands of physicians, but only upper-class people went to physicians, so we can assume that she has fallen in status. To say that she spent all of her money implies that she was a widow or she would not have had control of money.

But Mark defines her as much by her determination as by her suffering, although we have to be patient through Mark's entire description for the most important action. After all that she suffered, she grabbed Jesus' cloak. She had not given up hope.

Her actions are a mirror opposite of Jairus'. She *must* be aware of her ritual impurity—that she simply could not touch another Jew, and most certainly not a rabbi, but she defied socially-appropriate protocol essentially "pick-pocketing" the healing that she believed would come if she just touched his clothes.

And the healing, in fact, did come! Even in the crush of people, on the way to save the life of an important member of the community, Jesus noticed healing energy leaving him in the instant that she noticed her body healing. Jesus had *silently* agreed to go with Jairus after Jairus made his *wordless* confession by kneeling before Jesus, but now Jesus asks who has touched him. The woman also kneels and makes her confession, but publically, in fear

and trembling, knowing that she has broken ritual codes and that she has taken something from him.

What happens next is crucial: Jesus lovingly calls her “daughter,” claiming this adult woman as a member of his family. Then, for the first time in Mark, he says to a follower: “Go in peace.” Even if her hope for healing involved a bit of magical thinking, Jesus publically affirmed the actions she took on her own behalf. As a result she was brought back from the margins into the collective center. She has been *both* cured *and* healed.

As for what Jesus says next, we can be distracted because the English language can’t easily express the word “faith” as a verb, as Greek and Hebrew can. We translate the word into something like “believing.” But in both Hebrew and Christian scripture, “faithing” is not the same as “believing” or “understanding.” Hear Jesus saying instead, “My daughter, your *trust*, your *loyalty*,” or perhaps even “your *bonding with me* has made you well. Go and have a new relationship with whatever was plaguing your body.”

Now the story abruptly changes again as messengers from Jairus’ house interrupt Jesus to say almost exactly the opposite: “Your daughter is dead. Why trust that the teacher can make her well?” Overhearing these remarks, Jesus’ response, “Do not fear, only believe,” but again hear the verb form of the Greek word: “Don’t fear, *faith*.” Don’t be afraid, trust instead.

Now Mark moves from a story about an “outsider-made-whole” to a story about an “insider-made-whole” and the mirroring continues. At the moment new life was given to a woman who had suffered for 12 years, death seemingly came to a girl who had lived a privileged life for 12 years. The outcast adult woman was made whole publicly before a mixed crowd. The child of the insider will be made whole in private surrounded by a family of faithful Jews.

Where the woman was the primary actor in her own healing, Jesus now becomes the primary actor in restoring a child to wholeness. Where the suffering woman made Jesus ritually unclean by touching him, Jesus now makes himself ritually unclean by touching the dead. Where Jesus named the adult woman as “daughter,” he now speaks just as lovingly to the child, lifting her by the hand, and saying in his native Aramaic, “Talitha cum,” which we hear in English as: “Little girl, get up!”

From the very beginning, this has been a story of contrasts braided into one story about wholeness. A man representing the people already at the center, went to a lakeshore beyond the city to be among people outside Jewish society. His trust in Jesus prompted him to act on his daughter’s behalf. As he walks with Jesus back home, they encounter an adult woman

who has had no one to act or speak on her behalf for 12 years. The woman takes healing for herself, and is affirmed and welcomed into the family of Christ, transforming her from "woman" to "daughter."

They walk on, Jairus and Jesus and the crowd, to see Jairus' daughter, who has since apparently died just at the cusp of womanhood after living in comfort for 12 years. The woman, although a mature adult, has been unable to act socially as a woman because she is an outcast, unable to bear children. But Jesus set her free to go into the world in peace—liberated her from her suffering and returned her to her community.

Jesus then restored a girl from the grip of a deathly sleep into the arms of her family at the marriageable age of 12, transforming her from "daughter" to "woman." In other words, Jesus has not only brought new life to two people and their communities, but he has returned their capacity to be life-bearers themselves.

This two-fold story ends just like last week's story of Jesus on the stormy sea, with everyone utterly amazed. Miraculous cures are amazing. Amazing enough to inspire us to pray for cures. Amazing cures sometimes come and Jesus told us to ask for them.

But the more life-giving, *healing* miracle that is always available to us is God's restoration or quickening of our relationship with God. Amazement can actually distract us, though that is often the most appropriate response we can muster when we encounter the Divine. But God is less interested in our amazement and yearns instead for our trust regardless of our life circumstances—for our bonding with God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead. The life-affirming miracle of God's healing is in God's promise to make us whole, though wholeness may come in unexpected forms. Every so often, wholeness also comes with cures.

So make your confession, be healed, and then get up and walk in peace. Do not fear, but trust instead.