

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

So, what do you do with stories from the Bible like the two we have in our gospel reading this morning, sandwiched together as they are? How do you make sense of them? How do you apply them to your life? Two people miraculously cured, each of them restored to life, one of them figuratively so, one literally raised from death. And these aren't isolated cases. Throughout Mark's Gospel, throughout all of the Gospels, Jesus is doing things like this. Curing disease, casting out demons, making the deaf to hear and the blind to see.

From all of these extraordinary activities it is easy to see that Jesus has special powers that other people don't have. As we saw last week, he can even calm a storm just by speaking to it. Here he's demonstrating that he can heal the sick and raise the dead. The disciples are being led to see through these remarkable acts that Jesus is God's agent, maybe even God himself come among us. But what do we do with that information?

One understandable approach is to see Jesus as a dispenser of personal miracles that our faith in him gives us access to. That seems to be exactly what both the synagogue leader and the woman with the hemorrhages are doing. They might not appreciate the importance of faith in all this, but they are coming to Jesus in their desperation, seeking help for themselves or their loved one. And in both cases, they get what they were hoping for. But as is often the case when reading the Bible, there is a cultural gap between us and the ancient world that can obscure the broader meaning in these texts, and that we have to attend to if we are to read these stories faithfully.

I want to help us bridge that gap in at least one way this morning by focusing on the three stories that comprise Mark chapter five, the two stories we have in our Gospel reading today and the story we skipped over between last week and this week. All three of them convey an important aspect of healing that an uncritical reading might miss, namely that in healing these three individuals Jesus also heals and restores their community as well.

The story we skipped over is the story of where Jesus and the disciples were going in the boats that got caught in the storm last week. You'll remember that they were going into Gentile territory. This is the story of the man possessed by demons who lived in the tombs. His possession made him uncontrollable and dangerous, and so he had to be exiled from his community. Jesus has a quick conversation with the demons possessing him. They know who he is. They recognize him as the Son of God, which is the answer to the disciples' question at the end of last week's reading: "Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Jesus then casts out the demons into a large herd of pigs, which rushes into the sea and is drowned. The man is overjoyed to be freed from his possession and asks to join Jesus' group. But Jesus refuses, and instead sends him back to his community, to his own people, to tell them what God had done for him. The man's cure, in other words, is not just about him as an individual. It also restores the community from which he had to be exiled from.

Something similar lies beneath the surface of the story of the woman with the hemorrhages in today's reading. She had a menstrual flow that wouldn't stop. It hadn't stopped for twelve years. That made her unclean in that culture, which was a normal experience for women of childbearing age, but only a temporary one each month. And anyone she touched would also be unclean, and have to stay away from others. There are detailed rules about this in the book of Leviticus. And just as an aside, they read a little like the public health advice we had during the pandemic: Stay away from others, clean the things that you touch. Jesus and his disciples have already been transgressing the cultural practices that kept people in their proper

places, people like women and foreigners and those who associated with them. For this woman to touch Jesus would normally have meant that Jesus becomes unclean. It would be an outrageous breach of social norms. But the opposite happens here. Instead of Jesus becoming unclean, the woman becomes clean. And that means being freed from her social isolation and being restored to her community, just like the possessed man in the previous story.

Finally, there is the story of the twelve-year old girl that begins and ends our reading this morning, a youngster at the point of death. One of the commentaries I consulted in preparing this sermon noted that it was not at all uncommon at this time for children to die. In fact, it seems that around sixty percent of children who survived childbirth died by their middle teenage years. But I can't imagine that that made it any easier to deal with. Just as in the other two stories, her healing, her being restored to life, was not just about her as an individual. It was also, just as importantly, about restoring her family and community. Notice how her sickness was a community crisis, how her family was surrounded by the community, how there was weeping and wailing at the news of her death. Notice also that once she is raised, Jesus orders them to feed her. We think of a patient in a hospital bed. In this culture, they would have thought of her back at the dinner table with her family and community.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we live in a culture in which the individual is supreme, where personal fulfillment is the ultimate goal, and so we tend to read that cultural value back into the Bible and miss that a person's family and community are integral to who they were. And because we do that, we also tend to miss that what God is up to in Jesus is about saving not just individual souls, but healing and restoring communities. We are forgiven our sins not because they offend God personally (God can take it) but because they affect our fellow human beings and the world that sustains us. If God is offended, it is for their sake. And so God's salvation in Jesus is not about plucking out select righteous souls from a world destined for destruction, as in the unbiblical, fabricated rapture fantasies of recent imagination. God's salvation is about new creation and new life, embedded in and enriched by community, the whole family of God's people. It is not for nothing that Jesus calls the woman healed by his touch "daughter."

I dare say that restoration to community is what we need in these fractious times. We need to regain some measure of trust in one another, some measure of commitment to the common good if we are to have any hope of survival as a nation. We need to restore a healthy relationship with the earth and its fragile ecosystems if we are to have any hope of survival as a species. And we have proven ourselves woefully inadequate to these vital tasks so far.

Jesus' healing and saving acts in this part of Mark's Gospel are signs of the coming Kingdom of God, signs that God will not abandon us to our folly, or to the painful realities of sickness and disease that continue to plague us in spite of the remarkable advancements in medical science. They point to God's promise that through Jesus' incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, God is at work to wrestle control of the world back from all the forces that defy and rebel against God. God's reign is even now at work to heal and restore us, and to empower us to be a community of healing, wholeness, compassion, and reconciliation, and a beacon of hope even in the face of death, which will not have the final word for us, or for the world God loves in Jesus Christ. May we take that promise to heart. May we not succumb to the fear that would paralyze us but trust in this good news that gives hope for the future that God intends for us and for the whole creation, and is even now bringing to pass. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.