

“At his Feet”

Mark 5:21-43

The last book that our book study group read together was about women Christian mystics – a lot of whom lived during the Middle Ages. They had these profound and powerful encounters with God: visions, miracles, revelations that they shared with others. What they experienced was so undeniably of God that news of them spread to commonfolk and powerful people and popes – even though the word came through the mouths of women. They spoke movingly of God’s presence in this world, of God’s unfailing love, and of hope for tomorrow.

But they also had this disturbing relationship with suffering. Some of them fasted so much that they ended up starving to death. Others thought that they needed to hurt themselves in order to understand God’s transcendence so they licked floors and burned themselves with candle wax and other things that are, frankly, more graphic than I’d care to mention here. Julian of Norwich, for example, prayed to have sickness and every kind of pain there is: physical, emotional, and spiritual.¹ They supposed that since Jesus suffered on the cross, any time that we suffer it brings us closer to him. They figured that suffering gave us an insight into who Jesus was and what he was willing to endure for our sake.

Now, as a book group, we tried hard to be understanding about this – it was a different time and a different place. They were Catholic and had a lot of different theology than we do. But... I don’t think we ever made it past this idea that God wants us to seek out suffering in order to be pious, good Christians. Faithfulness doesn’t mean hurting ourselves or starving to death. Pain doesn’t automatically bring us closer to Jesus.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, we meet quite a few people in pain. There’s a girl close to death, her father Jairus who is out of his mind with worry, a woman who suffers from

hemorrhages, and a crowd full of people weeping and lamenting the death of a child. Not one of these people chose to be sick or worried or grieved. They didn't go looking for their heartache – it just happened to them and they didn't know what to do.

Jairus is the leader of a synagogue, which may mean that he was one who presided over worship. His name means, “he enlightens” – a reference to the light that comes from God.ⁱⁱ He is a faithful man, raised in a religious family, now a religious leader. But none of that matters as he frantically searches to find healing for his daughter. He humbles himself and falls at Jesus's feet. He has nowhere else to go, no one else to turn to – if Jesus just comes to his daughter, she will be restored and renewed and rescued from the edge.

Then, in a great crowd, a woman comes along behind Jesus. We learn that she has been sick for twelve years. She has spent everything she had – that means more than just money. She has spent her time, her energy; she has used up all her goodwill all over town and now she's just...spent. The pain is loud – louder than the crowd all around her – so she reaches out for Jesus. She doesn't presume to reach for his hand; even the hem of his cloak will be enough to free her from the sorrow that saps at her for what feels like forever. After he heals her, she falls at his feet and confesses what she has done. She drew power from him because she could not live that way anymore. Jesus lifts her to her feet and says that it was her faith that made her well.

It seems that not everyone noticed this woman's healing. News comes that the little girl died and so they want Jesus to know that he's no longer needed. They didn't say that directly to Jesus, but he heard it and challenged them. “Do not fear, only believe.” Jesus came into the house with a few of his disciples, surrounded by loved ones with breaking hearts, falling apart together. They weep and wail – their grief hangs thick in the air and it is loud. But Jesus calls them to quiet, to calm, to hope. Hearing this, they mocked him, they snickered at this absurdity,

so Jesus turned them all outside. With just mother and father, he came to the little girl. He held her hand and said, “Talitha cum” – “little girl, get up.” And this tiny, weak, pale twelve-year-old girl stood up and walked around. Her parents were stunned – they could not believe what they had witnessed. Jesus said they should keep this to themselves and give the girl some food.

And that’s how the lesson ends. Sometimes when we hear stories like this, the message that we hear is that the ones with the real faith get healing. But where does that leave us when we are in times of suffering: whether it’s physical, emotional or spiritual; whether it’s something that we caused or something that just happened to us? It’s easy to wonder somewhere in the back of our minds if our faith isn’t “pure” enough to be truly saved.

But I don’t think that’s what the message of this story is. Sickness, pain, grief, and death are no more a test or proof of our faith than any other moment of our lives. I don’t think Jesus called us to starve ourselves to death to prove our piety or to beg for illness so that we can get closer to God. In this Gospel lesson, we find that pain and suffering are a part of life – a part of everyone’s life. For Jairus, the sudden illness of his daughter has consumed him so totally that it is the only thing he can see anymore. For the woman with the hemorrhage, she’s been dealing with her illness for twelve years. By this point, she might barely remember what life was like without having to deal with her illness. For the girl on her sick bed, though her life was short, she can feel it slipping away from her. But, more than that, she has been alive as long as the woman has had her hemorrhage. In very different ways, each one of these people had their life overcome by illness and pain and all they can do is cry out at his feet.

When Jesus comes to them, he interrupts their pain. He opens their eyes so that they can see that a father’s fear, a woman’s physical suffering, and a child’s dwindling energy are not all that there is for them. He restores them to their lives and they resound with praise. But, here’s the

thing... they had this profound connection to Christ and they each experienced miraculous healings. But the lives that they carried forward still had the same moments of suffering as everyone else's. They stubbed their toes and got colds. They had loved ones get sick and die. And, one day, each of them went home to be with Jesus. When Christ healed them, he showed them that pain in all its forms can cloud our reality, our perspective – it can seem to choke out all the light of goodness all around. However powerful pain might seem, Jesus has healing hands that lift us from our feet. Jesus leads us from the darkness of our sorrow and into the light of release – not all at once; not on our timetable; but little by little until he calls us home, too.

We do not need to cultivate a particular pain to grow in our faith or even a particular response to pain. We do not need to prove our piety by being longsuffering and secretly miserable. Those healing hands of Jesus can cut through all the noise, all the fear, all the despair that threatens to undo us. If we remember to seek him in moments of chaos, we can hear him whisper to each one of our hearts, “Talitha cum” – “little one, get up.” Amen.

ⁱ “Women Christian Mystics: Speak to Our Times” Edited by David B. Perrin. Sheed & Ward: Franklin, Wisconsin, 2001, p.44.

ⁱⁱ <https://somuchbible.com/word-studies/annotated-scripture/mark-521-43/>