

28 June 2009

Last week we talked about looking at religion in terms of anthropology: what it says about us human beings. One of my beliefs about human beings is that we are creatures of story. Facts, in and of themselves, mean nothing to us. Life is about more than just the collection of data. It's much more about how we put that data together, and the story we construct around them. Christopher Columbus: bold explorer and discoverer of the New World? Or genocidal conqueror and robber? The Confederacy in the Civil War: rebel heroes fighting for states' rights? Or rebellious brutes fighting for the right to exploit and abuse fellow human beings? All these viewpoints have facts to back them up, and all of them are at least partly true. But the stories we tell about them have the power to shape our reality and even form our future. This is why we need to be very careful and thoughtful about the stories we tell. This is why religion has the power to shape human lives in a very different way than science ever can. After all, whether or not I believe in evolution, the laws of evolution still function. (Yes, it is a fact!) But my beliefs about creation affect the way I interact with the world around me, and therefore impact the state of the world itself.

All of that is a long-winded way to say that there is great power in the stories of the Bible, even though our understanding and interpretation of those stories shifts and changes and evolves over time: over the centuries for us as a community of faith, and over our individual lifetimes as we read these stories over and over again. They say you never step in the same river twice. On the surface it may look the same, but that water, the creatures in it, even the earth and stone of the riverbed are always changing. In the same way, we never really read the Bible the same way twice, because we and the world we live in are always changing, and the Bible speaks fresh meaning to us in the same stories we think we know so well.

The story of Jairus' daughter and the woman with the flow of blood is a rich one that strikes me anew every time I read it. There is so much meaning here, layers and layers of nuance, so we will never run out of things to discover about these stories. I thought I was going to talk about the age-old dilemma of faith and healing, but as I read the passage over and over, I kept getting caught on Jesus' response, "Why are you making such a fuss? The child is not dead; she is sleeping." Jesus never seems to believe the girl is dead at all.

We might compare this story to that of Lazarus, where Jesus is again very dismissive, almost blasé about everyone's worry for Lazarus. It's only when Jesus shows up and sees the mourners that he is moved himself. In that story Lazarus has already been buried for several days, and when they open the tomb, there is a stench. Lazarus is clearly dead. But I began to wonder: was Jairus' daughter really dead? Or did everyone just believe she was? We're just taking the crowd's word for it here, but could they have been wrong? Was she alive all the time? I don't know what the facts are, but let's explore this interpretation of the story.

One of the leaders of the synagogue comes to Jesus. We may recall that Jesus has not been getting along too well with religious leaders, but this man comes not with accusations but with a plea: my daughter is ill to the point of death. Come lay your hands on her that she may be made well and live! Jairus doesn't see Jesus as a source of chaos, but as a source of life, and who cannot be moved by his plea on his little girl's behalf?

We are told that she was twelve, a fact that means nothing in itself. The meaning comes in this way: she was still a child, not yet a woman. Not yet married, because she still lives in her father's house. Girls tended not to be valued as highly in that time and place, except as commodities to be married off. The greatest status women could achieve was through the sons they bore, but this girl had not reached child-bearing age. We could take these facts and discover a story in which she was not yet a real person, a drain on her family's resources, not that valuable. Her death might be seen as no great loss.

Yet this father did love her. He broke ranks with many of his fellow religious leaders to seek out Jesus for healing in behalf of a daughter whom he could not bear to lose. The scripture says he fell at Jesus' feet and begged him repeatedly. Society may not have valued this girl, but her father clearly did. And Jesus responds to this heartfelt plea. He sees the father's love and goes with him to heal his child.

But then the story is interrupted. Bible stories don't usually get interrupted like this. Each little tale almost stands on its own, which makes it convenient for reading in church on Sunday! But we can't carve up this story. These two tales are woven together, and they cannot be split apart. Why are the stories told this way? Why aren't they separate? The closer we look at it, the more details we see, ways in which these two stories are definitely connected.

The woman has had a flow of blood for twelve years, the same as the daughter's age. There's no way that's a coincidence. The flow of blood meant this woman could not get pregnant. She would have held a kind of non-entity status, like the girl. She'd gone to experts, spent all her money on physicians who not only couldn't help her, but who actually made her worse. We all know stories like that! There are a lot of good doctors, but there are also bad ones. And sometimes it's simply a situation that doctors can do nothing about. They took her money but couldn't help her. Might these same doctors have been the ones to diagnose Jairus' daughter as being on the verge of death? Might these same doctors have been the ones to declare her dead? Could they have been mistaken? Or – maybe because in both cases they were dealing with childless females – could they have just written them off? It is a sad fact but true, that people whom society views as less valuable tend to receive inferior medical care. Fact. Relevant here? It don't know, but it seems likely to me.

Like Jairus, the woman comes to Jesus for healing. She does not fall down before his feet and beg repeatedly. After all, she's not a bigwig at the synagogue. She might think Jesus will ignore her, like that leper we heard about weeks ago, asking, "If you will, you can heal me." She doesn't bother to ask, perhaps fearing rejection. Instead she reaches out and touches. She touches, and immediately feels that she has been healed.

Jesus feels it, too. He asks the disciples, "Who touched me?" They're confused. People are pressing all about, how can they know? But Jesus did know. What was different about the way she touched him? Surely other people had some kind of ailment, some kind of hopes and fears. But only her touch drew power. Jesus tells us that her faith healed her. Maybe this is why he sought her out. She was hoping for a bit of anonymous healing. Don't trouble the famous rabbi, don't risk rejection, just touch the cloak and get the healing the doctors could never give her. Jesus could have treated it like a theft, but he didn't. He insisted on identifying her, on seeing her, on recognizing her as a person worthy of being healed, a person worthy of being commended for her faith. He goes so far as to call her "daughter." This woman whom others were willing to write off, to dismiss as socially dead, this woman Jesus publicly honored.

But how would the crowd have seen it? Were they surprised that Jesus singled her out? Did they possibly even resent the praise Jesus offered her? And what does this powerful leader of the synagogue think? His daughter was on the point of death, and he was bringing Jesus home to touch her. Did this unworthy woman steal Jesus' mojo and leave him unable to

heal Jairus' daughter? Jairus might very well believe that, especially since Mark makes a point of saying that even as Jesus was talking to this woman, messengers arrived from Jairus' house with the news that his daughter was dead. Could it be possible Jairus was thinking, "If only you hadn't stopped to talk to this woman, you could have saved my daughter's life,"? He might once more have written off this woman, dismissed her for dead just as the messengers dismissed his daughter. If we tell the story in that way, then Jesus' words take on even more meaning: "Do not fear, only believe." Again, not too different from what Jesus told the disciples last week in the face of the storm.

Jesus goes to Jairus' house, chides the mourning crowd for acting as if the girl was dead and beyond hope. He sends everyone away, takes the father and mother into the room, takes the girl's hand and says, "Little girl, get up!" Not "be healed." Just "Get up," as if indeed she had merely been sleeping.

How closely are these two stories related? Do the facts of one impact the meaning of the other? Could be. One lesson to draw from all this, one meaning to ascribe to these facts, is about faith and healing. But another lesson might be about not writing people off as dead or hopeless. Not dismissing people as being not worth the trouble.

How often does our society write off children? Kids in foster care: they're lost causes. If you adopt them, you're taking on a charity case. Kids who get into drugs. Kids who run away. Kids who get in trouble with the law. Kids who are born into the wrong neighborhood. Kids who don't have fathers. Kids with autism. Kids with ADHD. Kids with learning disabilities. Even kids who are "spoiled," as if they can never make good again. How many kids are written off by our society? Dismissed as hopeless, good as dead?

And how many adults who are ill get written off? Their case is hopeless. Cancer. Alzheimer's. Incurable. They have no insurance. They are illegal immigrants. They're mentally ill. War veterans with PTSD. They're too poor. The wrong race. Speak the wrong language. They're gay or transgender. The ambulance doesn't want to drive into that neighborhood. The doctor can't take another patient on Medicaid. Who gets written off? Who gets left for dead?

That's not the only way to read this story, not the only way to assign meaning to these facts. But it's what struck me on this reading. One of the commentators I read said, "Healing is the restoration of meaning to people's lives no matter what their physical condition might be." Jesus saw meaning in the lives of a twelve-year-old girl, and a woman who had bled for twelve years. Are we as perceptive as he is? Do we see with his eyes?