

The God of Lost Causes

By Kate Wolfe-Jenson

A month or so ago, Pastor David asked me to preach this summer. OK, I'm a teacher; I'm a workshop leader; I can do this. Yikes! I can't do this! Even though I was scared, I seemed to hear a little voice saying, "Get up! Do it!" so I said, yes. I thought, "finding a topic will be easy—I'll just look at the lectionary." So I looked up the reading for today, the Mark stories you just heard: *A Girl Restored to Life and a Woman Healed* (Mark 5: 21-43). I thought, "oh no! Not a healing story! Don't make it be a healing story!" But the little voice, which I now had come to suspect might be the Holy Spirit, said "Get up! Do it!"

You may already have guessed some of the reasons I wanted to run away from this story. You can tell by looking at me (as I sit in this electric scooter) that I have "healing issues." Twenty-two years ago I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. MS is an odd disease. For a while, it does a dance with the body. Symptoms come, and then they go away. Something else happens, and then it disappears. "Maybe," said the neurologist who diagnosed me, "you won't even know you have it." Usually, though, there's a downward trend—the disease gets worse over time. Being ill becomes a bigger and bigger part of life. The experts don't know exactly what causes it; they don't know how to cure it; they don't know why some of the drugs they use to try to treat it make a difference. MS is unpredictable and mysterious.

I am an advice magnet. There's something about me that seems to send the message, "Tell me what to do." Maybe it's something I developed by being the youngest child. I don't know. If people see me out with my dog, they come over to me to suggest dog foods and collars. If I'm out with my daughter, Alexis, people tell me to take the training wheels off the bike soon. And, since about 1990 when I started using a cane, they have been telling me how to heal.

For a while, desperate to be normal, craving well-being, I tried whatever I could afford: yoga, Chinese herbs, vitamins, acupuncture, chiropractic treatments, special diets, transpersonal body therapy. Each time I tried some new treatment, I would feel a little better for a while. The folks presenting them to me were sure they could help. Buoyed by their enthusiasm, I would start looking for signs of healing. I would feel a little stronger. I would think some of the numbness was going away. I would start fantasizing how it would feel to walk. And, after a while, things would seem to get stuck. The healing wasn't happening. The healer would stop talking about further improvement. I would start looking at the bank balance. Hope would crumble. This was not a fun process. Eventually, I said, "I am never going to do this to myself again. It's too painful."

Then God puts these stories in my path and says, "Here. Teach this." More evidence that God has a sense of humor!

I had the luxury of living with these stories for a month or so, reading what other people have written about them, imagining what went on between the lines, finding meaning in them. The scriptures are rich tapestries. The more closely I looked, the more colors I found. I'd like to show you just a few of the threads I teased from these stories.

Each person-- Jairus, the unnamed woman, and Jairus' daughter - has different needs. God guides each through a similar process. These stories suggest a path for me to follow in my own healing and they have revolutionized the way I think about healing.

Jairus comes to Jesus. Now Jairus is an important guy—he's a leader in the synagogue. He's a part of the power structure. He is so important that the gospel writer is mentioning his name—we might have heard of him, you see.

But this story is not about Jairus' power; it's about his desperation. He is not leader of the synagogue right now. He is a worried father. It looks like his daughter is dying and he's gonna try anything to stop it. As hard as the soar and crash of my hopes for healing have been, I know that if it were about Alexis, it would be seven times worse. Seventy times seven. God, through Mark, is demanding my attention here! God is calling Jairus to radical action.

Imagine things at Jairus' house. His daughter is ill; they are sure she is dying. According to Hebrew law, the funeral must be held immediately—maybe on the evening of the day of death. Visitors are starting to arrive. The burial ointment and clothes are ready. Jairus slips away. He goes to this itinerant preacher—he's stepping outside his usual world and he's asking for help. No, he's not asking. This proud leader is falling at Jesus' feet and begging. This is a guy who is used to being on the other side of this equation: he is supposed to be the beg-ee, not the beggar. But, finally Jesus hears the request and goes with him.

Whew! They're off towards Jairus' house to save the day. They're striding through the city, trying to get there in time. The crowd is coming along for the show.

Suddenly, Jesus stops and says, "Who touched my clothes?" The disciples look at him with their mouths open. "Hello. There's this crowd all around us! Of course someone touched you! C'mon, let's go. This guy is important!" But Jesus doesn't budge. "No. I felt it. Someone touched me. Who was it?" A nameless nobody, comes forward, trembling, terrified. She, too, falls at Jesus' feet and she stammers out her story, sure that she is in for it now.

She has been bleeding for twelve years. Under Hebrew law, a menstruating woman was expected to stay at home for seven days. Anything she sat on, or lay on, was unclean. Anyone who touched her was unclean for the rest of that day. All would have to be ritually purified. There is even a special section in Leviticus to deal with any woman who had a discharge, "beyond the time of her impurity," to make sure the Hebrew people understood that there were no exceptions. This woman was officially untouchable, and had been for twelve years. For twelve years she had "endured much under many physicians, and had spent all she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse."

Anyone want to guess with whom I felt most kinship in these stories? This woman has been given, every signal, every opportunity, to GIVE UP.

Forget it! You're hopeless! You're unclean! You are nothing we want, everything we don't want. Get away!

But she has a deep, deep faith. She hears about Jesus and thinks, "if I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." So she goes out. She dodges through the crowd, trying not to touch anyone else.

She reaches out and sneaks one touch. And the bleeding stops. And she knows that she is healed. Oh, her joy! Like dancing, like flying! Now she's ready to creep home, wait seven days and then take two turtledoves to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting so that he can "make atonement on her behalf before the Lord for her unclean discharge." Then, she will be clean. She can enter the temple and give thanks to God. She can rejoin the community, be a part of the family. God has given her healing where she barely had hope. What a God!

That alone would have been something, wouldn't it? But our God is an awesome God, and Christ is a teacher of true healing. The woman has endured twelve years of discomfort and isolation. She needs to be healed of more than the discomfort. So Jesus stops. On his way to save the daughter of an important leader, he stops. He listens to the woman as she tells him the whole story. He says, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease." This woman, who defied the law, came out in her unclean state and risked the purity of everyone who might have brushed against her...this woman, who is interrupting an important mission...He calls this woman "daughter." With that word he enfolds her into the family; he declares her return to the community. Then he sends her forth in peace and healing.

There it is, in a nutshell: the healing invitation of God. God values us and values our stories. God calls us to move beyond the limitations we think we have, beyond the strictures others may place on us. God brings us to wholeness and affirms us a part of God's family.

But wait, there's more.

Some people come from Jairus' house to say his daughter is dead. It's too late - Why trouble the teacher any further? Jesus immediately turns to Jairus, who is no doubt standing there feeling like he's been kicked in the stomach...breathless, shocked, a huge wall of grief poised to fall on him. I imagine Jesus grabbing him by both shoulders, looking into his eyes, and saying to him, with all the authority he can muster, "do not fear, only believe." Then he turns to the crowd, including most of the disciples, and he says, "You stay here." He takes only Peter, James, and John, Jairus and the messengers, and he goes on to Jairus' house.

When they get there, the house is in uproar. This is not a Scandinavian household. Professional mourners are wailing, giving the family and friends more permission to wail. Jesus says to these people, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead. She's only sleeping!" They laugh at him. "Look pal, we know dead, all right? We're professional mourners. We serve on committees at the temple. We're educated people. Jairus must have been half-crazed with grief to go to you. Get out of our way, Nazarene carpenter, and let us do what needs to be done." But instead, Jesus puts *them* out and goes, with the child's parents and his own friends, into the twelve-year old girl's room.

Now, twelve, 2000 years ago, is not the same as twelve today. At twelve, this Hebrew girl has just become an adult. She has just reached the place in her life where she is expected to start putting away her childhood games and take on more responsibility. She is eligible for marriage, though it's likely to be three or four years before she's wed. What a wonderful, horrible time in a girl's life.

I think about young women I know in today's world. Young women who are struggling because they're not sure what adult life might hold for them. So they stop eating. Or they cut themselves.

Or they go a little crazy. They want to be safe. They want to feel valued. And here, at the edge of childhood, they feel neither.

Jesus goes to this adolescent girl and says, “Little girl, get up!” “Little girl,” he calls her, not “young woman.” He lets her know that she can remain in the comparative safety of her childhood for a while longer. But he also calls her to “get up,” to step forward and be who she is, out loud in front of everybody. And she gets up and walks around.

Then, ministering to father and daughter at the same time, Jesus tells them to give her something to eat. This father who, in his desperation, has taken a huge risk, has humbled himself, has endured impatient waiting and horrendous grief, is given a task that allows him to return to the comfort of daily life and to affirm his daughter and his family in a way most of us have done--- by feeding them. The pattern here is complete, for both father and daughter: valuing and accepting the individual first, calling that person beyond the comfortable, and bringing each into the family of God.

So, what does this mean to me and to us?

If we are caught up in our own importance, God challenges us to humble ourselves and ask for help. God sends the crowds away, makes miracles, and then advises us to tell no one.

If we are convinced of our worthlessness, God calls us to have hope and let it move us to action, to stand before the crowd and tell our story, to remember that we are part of the family of God, to be in peace.

If we are hiding from uncertainties, God calls us to get up and accept nourishment.

God calls us to be more when we argue that we are less and less when we are sure that it’s all about us.

There are a group of experts who do form criticism of the Bible. They look at the structure of the texts to try to discern what may have been the original story and what may have been added later. Perhaps these miracle stories, some of them say, were added later to make political points. The early church struggled with whether they were a Hebrew movement or one that accepted gentiles. Maybe this story is about that: the untouchable, marginalized woman represents the gentiles and Jairus represents the Hebrews. Christ came to both of them. Or maybe the writer is trying to show, after earlier chapters describing Jesus’ teachings, that Jesus was clearly a messenger of God and someone to whom we should listen. It can’t really mean—literally—that a girl was raised from the dead.

Because if Jesus really raised that girl, if he really healed that woman, why do I still have MS? Don’t think I haven’t prayed to be cured. Don’t think I didn’t try to atone, at twenty, for every sin I thought I had committed or even contemplated. Don’t think I haven’t tried positive affirmations and healing visualizations up one side and down another. If God can heal then why am I still sick?

I was talking about this sermon with a friend of mine and told her that was the question that was still bothering me. She said, “Can you ask that question in front of everybody?” How can I NOT

ask that question? That little voice, that voice that got me up here in the first place, that irritation of a Holy Spirit, is telling me that dealing with this question is the reason I was invited, called, and even pushed, to learn from THIS story over all others.

I was driving in my car, holding this moment in the sermon in my mind, asking God, “If you healed them, why not me?” I pulled into the garage, turned off the engine and, in that second of silence, I heard “You *are* healed. That’s what I’ve *been doing*.” Holding that thought—and carrying these stories with me—has led me to a new understanding of healing and of God.

Healing is not something God DOES. Healing is something God IS—that wonderful, baffling, bright source and advocate of goodness and love...*that* is the cure. If we live and move and have our beings in that Source, we are cured. Telling our stories and listening to our brothers and sisters as they tell theirs, moving beyond our comfort zones and encouraging our brothers and sisters move beyond theirs, affirming that we are one family, glorifying God, all that is healing work. All that is creating relationship with God and if I focus on creating and recreating a close relationship with God, I am whole. Right here, right now, in this body. Thanks be to God.

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E-mail kate@jensons.com