

11.08.09 / Mark 5:21-43

This is the last of three “power” stories in Mark – the calming of the storm, the healing of the demoniac, and these two stories, in which Jesus heals and then raises the dead. It is also important to see that these last two miracles form a unit. First, they are intertwined, although Mark could have told one story and then gone back and told the other separately. Second, they involve some similar elements, including ones that appear to be mentioned mostly to tie the stories together. For instance, the recipients of healing in both cases are women, and one is twelve, while the other has had her problem for twelve years.

What did it mean for those who first heard it?

One important translation note seems worthwhile here. The word used that is normally translated “get well” or “cured” is the same as the word for “saved”. We could render Jairus’ plea as, “Lay your hands on her so that she will be saved and live,” the woman’s thoughts as, “If only I touch his garments I will be saved,” and Jesus’ comments to her as, “Daughter, your faith has saved you.” “Saved” is a verb that normally has an object, and here we get that sense. The woman is saved from her disease and Jairus’ daughter is saved from death. Elsewhere in Mark the word saved is used for salvation from blindness (Mark 10:52), crucifixion (Mark 15:30), and in a holistic sense (Mark 16:16). We should remember as we read this story that “saved” originally meant something, and one would have to ask, “Saved from what?” Jesus, in this story, seems intent on saving people from all kinds of things we don’t mean when we say “saved”.

The ruler of the synagogue bears some comment. We associate synagogues with religious activities, and the ruler of the synagogue is, most of us presume, the rabbi. In Jesus’ day synagogues probably provided a number of important functions, only some of them religious. The ruler of the synagogue is more like a community center president, overseeing all manner of synagogue activities, including the religious ones. Ironically, in light of later context, Jesus actually is a rabbi (a teacher). However, the synagogue ruler’s authority is actually greater in some sense because the synagogue serves many purposes. He is a very respected man in the community, both in the religious and secular worlds.

Finally, we should note the obvious: the woman who has been bleeding for twelve years is not bleeding from her arm; she has a menstrual problem. And, the less obvious, this makes her ceremonially unclean. In the normal course of events she would be able to cleanse herself fairly rapidly after her bleeding stopped, but her bleeding hasn’t stopped for twelve years. She is also probably suffering a number of associated problems, such as anemia, and in an age before feminine products her condition may have been obvious to others, causing her much embarrassment.

There’s a distinct parallel between the two halves of chapter 5 in the first sentences. On one side of the sea a demoniac, a representative of the twisted Satanic world, comes and falls at Jesus’ feet, begging for mercy. On this side the same action occurs, only it is a powerful man of the chosen people, asking mercy for his daughter. Jairus also shows a great deal of confidence in Jesus. He (like the demoniac) has no doubts that Jesus can make things happen.

At verse 24 the story shifts. We now hear of the woman with the bleeding problem. We know by the end of verse 26 that she is unclean, that she has suffered for a long time, and that the powers of the world have failed to heal her, but instead impoverished her. (This also tells us the severity of her condition, either medically or socially. If

her bleeding was a minor issue she likely would not have spent so much trying to correct it.) Through verses 27-29 she, too, demonstrates great faith, and is healed by this faith.

This incident is somewhat complicated. Jesus' reaction, as well as the passive verbs used, tends to indicate that this was not something Jesus planned to do (to whatever extent Jesus can avoid planning things). Instead, it seems that Mark wishes us to notice that Jesus heals this woman because Jesus, as God's agent and God, is so full of God's transformation that it sort of "leaks out" into his clothes and does God's work.

The second section of this incident stresses Jesus' mercy. He searches out the woman, but not to yell at her for being an unclean woman imposing upon him, an important teacher on an important errand with an important man, but to tell her that her faith has saved her, and to send her off in peace.

At this point we switch back to the Jairus plotline. Having established Jesus' power and character we now learn that Jairus' daughter is dead, and that some of the ruler's household, at least, think Jesus cannot solve this problem any longer. Jesus asserts that he can, without saying how, and cuts the group following him down to his three closest disciples. (James, John, and Peter are the most common very small group to accompany Jesus to important places or events.) This is probably done both because Jesus is going to be fairly secretive about what is about to happen, and also perhaps out of respect for the synagogue ruler.

Upon entering the house Jesus faces more skepticism, this time from the mourners (who may be professional mourners). He asserts that the girl's condition is reversible, that of sleep, not death. Jesus then kicks them out and takes only the girl's parents and James, John, and Peter to the girl's room. At this point he raises her to life in perhaps the most un-dramatic fashion ever: he holds her hand and tells her to get up (in Aramaic – which is probably transliterated and then translated to stress the words). However, the result is dramatic. The girl gets up, appears fine, and Jesus tells her parents to get her something to eat. We also learn that the girl was twelve, which ties her to the woman earlier in the story. Perhaps Mark is telling us that if we'd paid attention to that story we would have understood that Jesus would be able to raise this girl.

Jesus also orders people to keep silent about this, which links to the theme of secrecy mentioned in the overview document.

One last thing remains to be said: Jesus is not the first person to raise the dead. In 1 Kings 17:17-24 Elijah raises a dead boy, although the action involved is slightly more elaborate. Elisha, who received a double portion of Elijah's spirit upon Elijah's odd disappearance (2 Kings 2:9-14), raises a man to life after he himself is dead (2 Kings 13:20-21). However, Moses and Elijah stand as the most important prophets of the Old Testament (Moses being the more important), and for Jesus to engage in miracles like Elijah or Elijah's disciple Elisha is big news. It means that he is an incredibly powerful prophet. When you add this to his defeats of the demon Legion and his calming of the storm we begin to see the emphasis in this section: Jesus possesses power far beyond that of any other prophet, even Moses and Elijah.

Some starter questions for this section:

- 1) In what way are the two stories, the bleeding woman and the dead girl, the same?
 - 2) What do we learn about Jesus' power in each story?
 - 3) What do we learn about Jesus' character in each story?
 - 4) How does Jesus treat the poor, unclean woman in the story versus the important synagogue ruler with a time-critical problem?
 - 5) How does Jesus react to the faith, or lack thereof, of the various participants in these stories?
-