

June 30, 2024
The 6th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 13, Year B
Mark 5:21-43
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Two Daughters

When I was eleven years old, I almost died of the chicken pox. I remember it the way a child remembers things, in flashes of images, probably missing a lot of the important details.

I got it from my sister's friend, who had come over for the day, long before such visits were called playdates. My sister, Morgan, who was six at the time, and her friend played together all day. I spent about an hour with them. But that hour was enough to do the job. A couple of days later both Morgan and I came down with chicken pox.

I remember getting to stay up late the day I was diagnosed, which was a Sunday night, and watching a movie, because I wasn't going to school the next day. Maybe, I thought, having the chicken pox wasn't going to be so bad.

I remember my skin erupting in chicken pox blisters. I remember my mom telling me that I should only scratch the painful, itchy bumps on my head, under my hair, where they wouldn't be able to see if they scarred.

I remember lying on my grandparents' couch, while they took care of my sister and me so that my parents could go to work. I remember Morgan, who also had chicken pox, maybe a total of ten blisters, whereas as I had ten on my little finger, doing cartwheels through the living room, while I didn't have the energy to move.

I remember my temperature going up and up and up. I remember them trying to put me in an Aveeno bath to try to sooth my skin and bring my fever down. I remember that it hurt.

I remember my fever reaching 105 degrees.

I don't remember this, but my mom said I had started to cough and she decided that something more serious was going on than a simple case of a childhood disease. She called the doctor. He told them to bring me in. I remember going to my pediatrician's office but going in through a different entrance. I remember being met by a nurse at a side door, and being taken down a long hallway I had never seen before. Part of me thinks there might have been a wheelchair involved, but I'm not sure that's true. At the time I thought I was being taken in through a different entrance because I was so sick, but as an adult I figure that they didn't want me brought into a waiting room of children with such an active infection of a contagious disease.

I don't remember what happened next, what the discussion was with the doctor or how I got there, but the next thing I knew I was in the hospital. I was at the UConn Medical Center, being admitted into an isolation room. The resident who handled my admission suggested that they count the chicken pox blisters I had. I remember my mother laughing at him. They just wouldn't be possible to count there were so many of them. So instead, they drew a box on my back with marker and counted the ones in the box. I don't remember how many there were.

Anyone who came into my room had to get into protective gear, robe, gloves, mask. The nurses didn't come in that much. As far as visitors went, I think only my parents were allowed to visit me in the room and they had to robe up, mask up, glove up too.

The room I was in had a big glass wall and I remember my friend Stephen and his mother, Kathy coming to visit me, to look at me through the glass wall, tapping at the glass, telling me that they loved me. I remember my pastor coming to visit me too, also looking at me through the glass wall.

Mostly I just remember being sick and feeling terrible.

Here's something I don't remember, though. Something that I only learned happened a few years ago. My mother was telling my mother-in-law about this experience, how sick I was, how serious it was. It turned out my case of chicken pox, a simple childhood disease had turned into a case of varicella pneumonia, a type of viral pneumonia, and that was what was killing me. Because it was. It was killing me. I don't remember knowing that then, but I know it now.

Apparently, the doctors told my parents that they were going to try a new anti-viral medication on me and it was either going to save me or I was not going to make it.

Apparently, they told my parents, "We'll know by morning."

Like I said, I only learned that part a few years ago, when I already had children, and I can imagine what it was like for my parents to hear those words, to know that their child, in the glass box room, was in a fight for her life. A fight that she might not win.

Obviously, I did. The medication worked, I spent a week in the hospital, and then I went home, weak, thin, and still covered in now healing chicken pox blisters. I survived.

Jairus's daughter didn't. Jairus from our gospel reading for today. I wonder what his daughter was sick with, what had brought her to the point of death. I wonder if the physicians of his day had told Jairus and his wife, "We'll know by morning."

Of course, Jairus ran for Jesus. Of course, he listened to the rumors about a traveling rabbi who had the power to heal. Of course he went looking for help, looking for anything that might have a chance of healing his daughter.

And he found him. He found Jesus and Jesus was coming. Jesus went with Jairus, the desperate father. How much joy and how much hope, how much relief must have flooded Jairus's body when Jesus responded to his need, when Jesus

started walking with him toward his daughter. How his mourning must have turned into dancing.

But then there was this woman; this unclean woman. This woman who knew that she was untouchable, unlovable, unworthy. So unworthy that she didn't run up to Jesus, like Jairus had. She didn't kneel before him; she didn't ask for his help. She tried to hide in the crowd around Jesus. She tried to sneak up on him. She tried to take what she believed she would never be given. She was too far gone to be worthy of the rabbi's notice, compassion, interest, mercy. And interacting with her would make him unclean. She knew that, but she was desperate. So, she reached out and she touched just the hem of his cloak, not his hands, not his feet, just the hem of his cloak, and immediately, she was made clean.

The story could have ended there. The woman was healed and Jesus wasn't slowed down at all. But he stopped. Can you imagine how frustrated Jairus must have been when he stopped. When he stopped and questioned the crowd. "Who touched my clothes?" (Mark 5:30)

Even the disciples thought that it was a foolish question. In that big crowd, of course people had bumped into Jesus, touched him, touched his clothes. Jairus, Jairus's daughter, didn't have time for this.

But the woman came forward, and confessed what she had done, that she had touched Jesus' cloak and she had been made clean. And Jesus said, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." (Mark 5:34)

The woman who had been healed would have been an outcast in her society, no one would touch her, people would try not to look at her, would try not to see her, would try not to know she existed. She was beyond hope, beyond help. But Jesus looked at her, he didn't leave her to be anonymous, he looked at her, he called her daughter, and she was outcast no more. He stopped for this woman, for this moment of grace, and restored her to her community.

Back to the chicken pox. After about a month, a week of being sick at home, a week of being sick at the hospital, and then time spent at home recovering from my ordeal, I went back to school.

And I was hideous. I was thin, I was ravaged, I was covered in half healed blisters over most of my body. I was a mess. But I'll be honest, I didn't really know it. I had gotten used to the way that I looked in the mirror, and, bad as it was, it wasn't as bad as it had been. And my family didn't let me know how hideous I was. Maybe they were being kind or maybe they had just gotten used to it, and, like me, could see that it was getting better.

You know who let me know how bad it was, how much like a monster I looked, how hideous I was? The kids at the bus stop on my first day back at school. I remember how they gasped when they saw me, how they backed away, how they refused to look at me, refused to talk to me, how they treated me as if I were unclean.

All expect for one kid.

There was a girl named Amy who lived in my neighborhood. Amy was a special needs kid; she was physically and developmentally disabled. She rode on the bus with the rest of us and somehow, I had ended up sitting with her most days. She was a few years younger than me, but we kept each other company on the rides to and from school.

On my first day back at the bus stop, when no one would speak to me, when no one, not even my friends, would look at me, Amy came running up to me, arms held wide, and said, "You're back! I missed you!" And she threw her arms around me.

That was one of the purest experiences of grace that I've ever received from a human being. Because it didn't matter what I looked like. It didn't matter how long I had left her to ride the bus alone. All that mattered was that I was back. I was reclaimed as a friend and a companion.

I hear that kind of grace in the way that Jesus spoke to the unclean woman. Daughter. He called her daughter. And with that word, he restored her to community. She was not “that woman”. She was no longer unclean. She was no longer someone to be avoided or ignored. She was a beloved daughter, healed, reclaimed, restored.

But I wonder if Jairus saw it like that. I wonder if he saw her as anything other than a delay and distraction from the vital urgency of his own daughter’s need for healing.

This story, which could be seen as two stories, but is really one story, is a story about two daughters. It is a story about God’s abundance. Because the mercy and power that Jesus poured out on the bleeding woman did not limit what Jesus could do for Jairus’s daughter.

When the neighborhood told Jairus that his daughter was dead, he must have gone down into the depths of despair. But Jesus gave him hope that all was not lost. The restoration of one daughter did not lead to the death of another daughter. God’s abundance, God’s mercy, God’s grace is better than that, it is not either/or, it is both/and.

Because Jesus, who had spoken to the unclean, bleeding woman, “Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace,” also spoke to Jairus’s daughter, “Talitha cum,” “Little girl, get up,” and the little girl rose from her deathbed and was restored to her parents, restored to her community, which now included the healed woman.

God’s grace, in Jesus Christ, was great enough, abundant enough, generous enough for both of them, for the two daughters, and their communities. Jesus’ arms spread in welcome; Jesus’ hand open in healing. Jesus’ words, speaking welcome and life. Jesus’ words speaking grace.

“Daughter.”

“Little girl.”

“You’re better, you’re back, I missed you!”