

**THE REAL MIRACLE; MARK 5:21-43; June 26, 2009; THOMAS H. YORTY;
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Perhaps you can picture that great mural by Michelangelo at the center of the domed ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: God extending his long arm and open hand with index finger reaching as far as possible to touch the extended finger, hand, and arm of Adam.

The genius of that image is Michelangelo's vision of creation: God's hand touching Adam's. Heaven and earth reaching toward each other, joining hands, bridging the divide, the abyss between and there was life and it was good.

That's what's happening in today's story from Mark. The woman touches the hem of Jesus' robe and Jesus touches the hand of the young girl: heaven and earth reach toward each other, connect, and there is life.

But before there is life there is desperation and death. Can you imagine the plight of the woman? She has hemorrhaged for twelve years – perhaps half her life. All she can remember are the visits to the doctors; the failed attempts at a cure; the expense that has eroded her finances – everything she had; her strength of heart and mind sapped by her disease. Nothing is left.

Or Jairus the leader of the synagogue. His daughter critically ill, there is little time. Unless someone does something she will die. His little girl for whom he would do anything – as any parent would for a sick child – is helpless and dying. Then he remembers the itinerant rabbi and sets out to find him.

By the time both of these figures converge into today's story Mark has introduced us, in five chapters, to Jesus; allowed us to witness his power to heal; his unequivocal call to honor God and celebrate life which attracted followers on the one hand, yet brought him into conflict with the religious authorities on the other hand.

In other words, before we get to today's story we know who he is and what he is about. The players have been identified and the setting depicted – the web of social, political, religious forces Jesus breaks through to touch those who are lost and broken and give them life.

But what we don't know yet is that this Jesus who comes to battle brittle religion and perform acts of mercy comes to each and every one of us who has ever been lost and lonely, desperate or afraid.

The characters we meet in Mark's story are mirror reflections of ourselves. Who can't recognize himself or herself in the plight of that exhausted, nameless woman or desperate father?

Mark neither suggests that our way to hope and healing, to God's kingdom is a drop-out-of-the-sky happenstance or that Jesus is a spiritual good luck charm.

Rather, Mark is clear today: Jesus comes to meet and befriend you and me.

In a scene just preceding his healing miracles Mark depicts Jesus teaching a crowd of people in a house when his mother and brothers arrive and send word to him that they are there. To which he says to the crowd, "Who is my mother, my brother?"

Then tells them: “Any one who does the will of God is my mother, my brother, my sister.”

You see, that is the context of our relationship to Jesus: personal, intimate. Like Michelangelo’s mural this is the remarkable synapse of life—God reaching out for you and me.

Yet, I’ll bet a survey would reveal not many of us describe our relationship to Jesus that way. We might call him a role model, teacher, figure of history but we would not say brother, friend, intimate, the one to whom I turn at the start of the day and throughout the day for guidance, support, and encouragement.

And so when our relationship to Jesus slips into the category of historical figure or virtuous leader we remove ourselves from his intimate circle to the bystanders and curiosity seekers. Which is to say we remove ourselves from his power to renew and restore us to life.

I was in the locker room at the Jewish Community Center the other day and I heard one man whom I concluded was a teacher, say to his friend, “I tell my students at this time of year there will be right answers and wrong answers on the final exam. No in between. In other words, it’s ‘come to Jesus’ time!”

And I knew immediately what he meant. He meant there’s a moment of truth called the final exam and you’d better study-up, you’d better get honest about what you know and don’t know and do your best to prepare because the chips will fall where they may.

I don’t know if that man was religious but his use of ‘come to Jesus’ was accurate: getting honest, taking stock, stepping out from the disguise, taking off the mask because that’s what people do in the Gospels.

But for better or worse it usually takes some impending moment of truth, some final exam, to get us to come to Jesus: a twelve year hemorrhage, a critically ill child.

Yet, the opportunity in every crisis, as the Chinese like to say, is that we now see things clearly; no more b.s.; no more kidding ourselves; no more self-deception or denial but honest accounting; not with our heads so much as our hearts.

Our heads will tell us anything we want to know; they can tell an addict life is grand and the lottery check is all but in the mail; they can convince us we’ve been kind, generous and understanding when we’ve been hard-hearted, stingy and self-protective. I am not saying that our heads are useless in our spiritual practice, to the contrary they help us question and explore our faith. But for many of us in the mainline Protestant tradition our heads can get in the way of our soul-searching. But our hearts tell us the truth.

I heard a wonderful interview last week on NPR with a man from a village on the isle of Crete where a tradition of men staying up all night to sing ancient songs in an all-but-extinct dialect is still observed. One of the songs was a beautiful poem translated: “tears pour down my face and chest and tell me the truth that is in my heart.”

Thank goodness those men still sing those songs in Crete because there might be some young person of the next generation who will hear and learn not just the melody but the message of that song: our hearts speak the truth, and it is often some tear-producing

moment, some crisis that finally breaks through our pride and self-sufficiency and impels us to reach out, to ask for help, to come to Jesus.

Of course some of us never do and who knows if Michael Jackson ever did but despite his fabulous genius and iconic shaping of music and pop culture and the vast riches that went with it, he described himself a lonely, broken man at the end.

What I am saying today is that there is a raw honesty in that woman stepping from the crowd and identifying herself when Jesus passed by; there is real self-disclosure when that VIP synagogue leader steps forward to identify himself to the very man whom the religious authorities were seeking to destroy.

But it wasn't just these two: Mark gives us example after example – the four friends who lower their buddy on a palette from the roof into the middle of a crowded room where Jesus is teaching; that persistent, tireless woman who badgers and banters with the judge for justice; the Samaritan woman at the well – a religious and social outcast – who conveys to Jesus her longing for living water; the prostitute Jesus saves from stoning; the criminal at the cross, at the last minute – all of them with enough pain and simple willingness to come to Jesus.

The parables, stories, encounters of Jesus are populated by those who have had their fill of the social circuit or power trip or lap of luxury or are sick and tired of being sick and tired and come to Jesus for something more.

That's the message this morning. It takes two – God and Adam, the one longing for new life and Jesus – for heaven and earth to connect and life to occur. I have no doubt that God and Jesus do their part. When I have been humbled enough to reach out like that woman to touch the sleeve of his garment or step forward like Jairus to ask his help at the risk of puncturing my pride – God and Jesus have been there.

When my mother remarried and I was thrown into a new high school; when I was searching my soul for some path to a career and then in that career at any number of junctures of disappointment, worry or fear; as a parent when contrary to what I thought were my best efforts my children seemed to slip farther from my reach and into danger; as a spouse navigating and negotiating the passages of life.

Each time I reached out or stepped forward I was met not just by a power greater than me but a presence that enveloped me with healing and purpose as personal as George Herbert's immortal poem describes.

What I am not so sure about is us doing our part. We're so fearful of revealing our innermost selves especially when we don't have the answers or power to control.

If there's one thing that would transform this congregation it would be the willingness to let go of our defenses and efforts to keep up our image and come to Jesus from the place where we are hurt or lonely or broken or afraid.

We do so many things so well: tackle community problems; reach out to other faith traditions; shape education that is serious and searching; send out members to mission fields as we will do this morning. But the one place where we could grow is revealing our hearts to God and one another.

The good news today is that if we come to Jesus like any of those in Mark's Gospel new life results – like Adam taking his first breath.

The real miracle today is not that woman getting healed or the little girl being brought back from death; the real miracle is what happens to us...

when we cut through our defenses and ask Jesus to stop the bleeding, to raise us from the dead because we're ready to meet him not as a figure of history but as our brother, our personal Lord and Savior. Amen.