

Lectionary 13/Proper 8 (B)
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Text: Mark 5:21-43

Pastor Aaron J. Couch
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon

I was talking with a friend recently. Over the past year he's had some fairly serious health issues. He's had to see his doctor more this year than in, probably, the last 10 years combined. A couple of weeks ago he called to get an appointment. There was something that was a cause for concern. The receptionist told him there was an opening in the schedule for him ... in September. It's enough to make me feel frustrated and angry on my friend's behalf. Is that the best they can do? Is that the best care they can give?

I find some of those same feelings being stirred up by our gospel story today. I mean, Mark tells a beautiful story about the woman who was healed and the girl who was restored to life. What Jesus did was really great for them. It was a profound gift. But how many other people were suffering or dying that day? What about them? Perhaps you've found yourself wondering about the same sort of thing when praying for healing for a loved one who is sick. What about the others?

Just this week a friend told me how his mom had been diagnosed with cancer. She had surgery, and then when she couldn't tolerate the radiation and chemo treatments afterward, she was admitted to a hospice program. Her family and friends prayed for her, prayed that God's power for healing would be with her. Six months later they kicked her out of the hospice program because she was well. And that was almost five years ago.

Another friend told me about his neighbor, who had been diagnosed with cancer. He asked for prayers from friends and neighbors and family. When he went back to the doctor, there wasn't any trace of the cancer. But then two months later he died. It turned out the cancer hadn't gone away after all. And I wonder—how do we make sense of all of this? It's so confusing! If God has power for healing, how come it seems so ... random?

As I've been reflecting on it, I wonder whether a big part of the problem might be how we, from our cultural vantage point, view disease and healing. In our view of things, disease is a medical problem, and healing has to do with restoring us to how we were before we got sick. So, for example, if you have an infection, the problem is probably bacteria, and healing happens by taking an antibiotic to kill the bacteria. Of course, if you're diagnosed with a disease for which there is no treatment, then that means there's no healing that health professionals can provide.

But our gospel story is not told from our cultural vantage point. It belongs to the 1st century, not the 21st century. And from the perspective of the story, healing is not the same as being cured of a disease. From the perspective of the story, the woman's problem wasn't just that she suffered from hemor-

rhages for 12 years. It's that this condition rendered her ritually unclean. It caused people to shun her. She was forbidden to touch anyone, and no one would touch her. Her whole life was isolated and cut off. The 12 year old girl's problem wasn't just that she was dead. It was that death severed all of the relationships that give belonging and joy. A corpse was understood to be ritually unclean, so that people would make sure they avoided touching one. In every way, her whole life was gone—not just her physical life, but also everything that kept her connected to others.

When we work to hear this story from its own cultural vantage point, suddenly it becomes a different story. It's not so much about a woman and a girl who were really lucky because Jesus intervened with a cure for them. Instead, it's a story of Jesus restoring wholeness, connecting people back to a life that is full. Start with the context for the story: Jesus has been traveling back and forth across the region, from Jewish communities to gentile communities and back again. He's been crossing over all sorts of cultural divisions that keep people separated, bringing the message of God's powerful love that makes lives new. Where people have been isolated and cut off from each other, Jesus is restoring connections and creating wholeness.

So in our story, Jesus gives life back to this woman and young girl—not simply physical life, but the sense of belonging and connection that give joy, that make life a blessing. It's not just a medical cure, but a matter of restoring connections and creating wholeness. That's one of the reasons touch is such an important part of the story. The woman suffering from hemorrhages—her condition cut her off from others. She was forbidden to touch anyone because to do so would cause them to be ritually unclean. She wasn't even supposed to be out in public like she was, and she certainly wasn't supposed to touch Jesus. But she was, and she did, trusting that touching him could heal her. And when she was found out, Jesus didn't judge her or condemn her. He told her, "Your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." By not refusing her touch, Jesus restored her and welcomed her back into community. Jesus touched the 12 year old girl, taking her by the hand and raising her up, giving her back to her parents.

For the woman and the young girl, what the gospel of Mark wants to tell us isn't so much that their condition was restored to what it was before. It's that Jesus gives them a new future, a future that is made whole because the barriers of separation have been crossed and relationships are renewed. And for us, in our life together, we celebrate the good news that Jesus' healing work isn't finished. It's still continuing. Whatever your medical condition might be, it places no limits on the possibility of experiencing Jesus' gift of healing. Every one of us comes to Jesus in need. In ways large and small, our lives aren't fully the blessing God desires to give. Perhaps in ourselves or in our relationships we feel somehow "out of joint." Or we recognize how we've failed

to live according to our ideals. Or maybe we feel oppressed by worry or fear or grief.

Through his word, Jesus is still able to touch us, to claim us for God's good purposes, to assure us that we belong to God and to God's people. Through the touch of his word, Jesus speaks complete forgiveness to us, and sets us in right relationship with God. Through the touch of his word, he promises that not even the barrier of death will be able to separate us from God's love. Now we may (or may not) continue to deal with any particular medical issues. And the health professionals we work with may or may not be able to provide a cure. But by the power of Jesus' touch, we are given back our true life, to be a child of God and a partner with all of God's people in God's great work of loving the whole world. Jesus restores us to our true identity and purpose, the deep wholeness that is God's passionate desire for us. And for our part, we simply reach out in faith, trusting that Jesus can say to us: "My daughter, my son, my beloved child! Your faith has made you well." Thanks be to God. Amen