

FOURTH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST
LECTIONARY YEAR B

by Rev. Emily Chapman
June 28, 2009

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



ST. PAUL'S
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Lectionary Texts:

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; and Mark 5:21-43

Mark 5:21-43

²¹When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. ²²Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet ²³and begged him repeatedly, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.”

²⁴So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. ²⁵Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. ²⁶She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. ²⁷She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.”

²⁹Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.

³⁰Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?”

³¹And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’”

³²He looked all around to see who had done it. ³³But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. ³⁴He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

³⁵While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader’s house to say, “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?”

³⁶But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe.”

³⁷He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James.
³⁸When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. ³⁹When he had entered, he said to them, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.”

⁴⁰And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. ⁴¹He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!”

⁴²And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. ⁴³He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

I got an email update this week from some friends who are expecting their first baby. They have chosen his name, begun preparing for his arrival, buying a stroller and carseat and getting his room ready. At a recent ultrasound, they discovered that somewhere early in their little boy’s development, something went terribly wrong. His skull has stopped developing and will never close over. If he survives his birth, he’ll live only a few moments after. His parents have gone from planning to bring him home and planning for his life to planning his funeral and making sure that his few moments on earth are free from pain.

As you might imagine, they feel an agony like Jairus, who in our Gospel lesson throws himself at the feet of a street preacher, begging him to come and heal his daughter who he knows is going to die. Miracle healings seem to be a dime a dozen in those days. In just our story from today there are at least two. But I think we all know that these days, people don’t often heal miraculously. We know the reality that sometimes people get sick and never get well.

And I couldn’t help but think of these two friends as I tried to write this sermon. In this email, my friend talked about how people were telling them that they were praying for a miracle for their baby boy. But she isn’t. It’s certainly not that she doesn’t want their baby to be born whole and have a normal life. But she has seen

the ultrasound images that show that her precious little boy does not have what he needs to live. Like most of us, they know that they need to accept what is.

That's what illness is about now. It's about accepting the facts. In some ways, that may be healthy. But in my own life, I have found that my acceptance of what is, my refusal to pray for healing, is often about my own lack of faith. I am not saying that I think things would have turned out differently for anyone who I prayed for if I would have asked God for a miracle. But I think my refusal to do so was more about my own self-protection, my own paralyzing fear of disappointment, my own unwillingness to show even God such desperation and despair.

But my friends do not see it the same way. Though they have accepted that they won't see their little boy grow up, though they are not praying for a miracle to save his life, they trust in a healing that is greater than a medical condition. They are taking comfort in the miracle that is already promised. That his life does not end in death, that we have the promise of life eternal, and that because of the promise of resurrection, we'll all be made whole. This is what enables them to celebrate his life. Our world tells us that a child born with severe physical or mental disabilities, a child without a fully formed brain, a child who can never live independently of caregivers or may not live long at all is not a life worth celebrating. Many cannot understand why they have continued the pregnancy, why they are preparing for whatever moments they have to be parents, why they are celebrating a life that will never amount to anything. But the truth is that this beloved child of God will dance with joy in the communion of saints and participate of God's new, restored creation in the same as any of us. He is a gift from God and an inheritor of God's promises. In short, the gift his parents have offered in sharing their story is that in the face of eternal life and the promise of being made whole, healing as we understand it, the physical restoration of individual health is not the most important thing.

There is another side to the story. Sam Wells, the dean of the Chapel at Duke University, shares a story of a man in a community where he served as pastor, a man who lived a little on the wild side, abusing alcohol and drugs and getting involved with a woman who also lived a little on the wild side. Less than a day after Sam

heard that the pair had split up, he heard that the man had been taken to the hospital after swallowing a bottle of pills. The pastor went to see him at the hospital, to find him losing consciousness, his liver having wasted away, his family gathering, almost buried in the emotional wreckage his life left behind. But the next morning, Sam got a phone call that the man had received a liver transplant and was recovering. Returning to the hospital, Sam found one of the angriest men he had ever seen. The man had meant to commit suicide and was not at all pleased to have been thwarted in his effort. The point is this: by all medical standards, this is a successful healing story. He was dying, and his life was saved. But there is more to healing than getting a new liver after you have destroyed your old one.

In the first story, the promises of eternal life and restoration are so real that the Kingdom of God has come very near to this hurting little family – so near that though they long for their son to be born whole, they stand firm in their faith that he will be made whole in God’s new creation. In the second story, the promise of forgiveness and eternal life are so far away that healing alone cannot change anything. Which brings us back to where we began, with Jesus and two women in need of healing. The woman in the road who has been bleeding for 12 years knows that she needs healing. So she reaches out and touches Jesus and is healed of her affliction. But remember what we have learned from our stories today. Healing isn’t everything. She has reached out in secret to receive what she thinks she needs, but Jesus knows there is something more.

Demanding to know who touched him, Jesus calls the woman out from the crowd. And perhaps the most miraculous thing, when called, the woman steps forward and tells the whole truth. I hope that I would have had the same courage, though I fear that if I was trying to lay low in a crowd, I might not respond so honestly to Jesus’ demand. But when the woman tells him it was she, he says, “daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your disease.” This woman, ritually unclean by her community standards, has suffered not only disease but isolation and rejection. Jesus declares before the whole community that she is healed, made clean, and is a precious daughter of God. He restores her to new life

not just by healing but with forgiveness and peace and restoring her to community, offering her the promise he offers everyone – that we are sons and daughters of God and will inherit all of God’s promises.

Both this woman and Jairus, a man of power who throws himself at the feet of Jesus, call us to examine our faith in the healing power of Jesus and also with the saving power of Jesus. Often we want the physical healing without the other kind of healing that Jesus brings. We want to be well, but we don’t want everything that comes with it. We want healing without salvation, which is the only place where true healing exists and does any good. Over and over and over again Jesus offers forgiveness and the promise of new life, the promise of the time when all things will be made right, that all bodies will be made whole, including the broken body of Christ – the Church. Jesus healing is not about us as individuals – Jesus comes to proclaim a time in which all wounds are healed and all people are made whole and worship the Lord forever, a time in which the whole communion of saints gathers in a joyful dance celebrating that God has indeed made all things new.

Does Jesus heal us in this life? Sometimes.

Can we see miracles on this earth? Sometimes.

Does Jesus save us and promise to bring us to a kind of wholeness and healing we cannot imagine? Does Jesus save? Always. Always, always, always.