



A TALE WITHIN A TALE

Psalm 130; Mark 5:21-43

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Mark likes a good sandwich. By this I mean, a good *literary* sandwich. He has a knack for starting one story and inserting another before he finishes up the first story. He does this throughout the gospel: when his family comes to take him home because folks say he is out of his mind; when Jesus announces that he will suffer and die; when he sends out the twelve disciples to carry out their mission; when he curses the fig tree and it withers.

It is not by accident that Mark gives us these *narrative sandwiches* that are made of two stories woven together. In our scripture for today, the story begins with a desperate father, a leader of the synagogue, pleading with Jesus to come heal his critically ill daughter. The story is interrupted by Jesus' encounter with the woman who is ill with a hemorrhage. In the midst of a hundred grasping hands, Jesus feels a powerful connection with one hand. The woman says that if she but touches his cloak she will be healed. After he heals her, the word comes that the little girl is dead. In spite of the ridicule of the mourners, Jesus goes to the house and restores the little girl to life. The top and bottom of the sandwich is the disrupted story of the little girl; the inside of the sandwich is the story of the healing of the bleeding woman who has tried every cure but has found no relief.

At first glance, we might think that these two stories are unrelated until Mark adds at the end as a kind of afterthought: oh, yes, by the way, the little girl was twelve years old. Suddenly we sense something more is going on here than two stories simply sandwiched together. The woman had been sick for twelve years. So, we begin to look for other connections. Jesus addresses the woman who would have been considered unclean as a "daughter." By touching Jesus, the woman threatens to spread her ritual uncleanness to Jesus; when Jesus takes the dead girl by the hand, he makes himself unclean because touching the dead also leaves one ritually unclean. In both cases, it is the healing touch of Jesus that makes them well instead of making him unclean. You might say that Jesus plunders the realm of the unclean and even the realm of the dead. He restores these two women to abundant life. Two needy outsiders become daughters of God.

Both the woman and the father of the little girl take Jesus seriously. Both kneel before him. I can imagine them crying out in the words of the familiar Psalm, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! (Psalm 130)." Both of them believed that Jesus could restore these lives and he does restore them. The Greek word, *sozo*, means to heal, to save, to make well, to make whole. What Jesus accomplishes is more than a physical healing. He restores their lives and brings them into full fellowship with God and with others. He gives them abundant life.

When we hear at the end of the story that the little girl was 12 years old and then recall that the woman had been sick for twelve years, we grasp that there is something more going on here than two individual healings. The number twelve stands as a sign that there is abundant life in Jesus not only for an unclean woman and a dead girl, but also for the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve disciples – that is, life for the whole people of God.

On the west coast of Scotland is the island of Iona. In the sixth century, Iona, under the leadership of St. Columba, became a center of Christianity in Scotland. For centuries Iona was the burial ground of Kings. For centuries, Iona endured Viking raids. It was a center of spiritual peace invaded and destroyed by war. In the past century, Lord George McLeod reestablished Iona as an ecumenical center and place for spiritual retreat and healing. The words of a hymn from the Iona Community express the heart of this story. The hymn prays eloquently and simply, "Jesus Christ, lover of all, trail wide the hem of your garment. Bring healing, bring peace."

This interwoven story clues us in that Jesus is on the loose in the world with divine power to restore life – abundant life for everyone. As the Psalmist says, "O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with God there is great power to redeem (Psalm 130)." At the end, those who doubted and those who laughed are left in speechless amazement.

When was the last time the gospel left you in speechless amazement? Some time ago, a member of the congregation I served called me about a serious problem he was having in his business. As the conversation drew to a close, he said that over the past few years his life in the church had grown to mean so much more to him. It was his relationship with Christ that had changed primarily through his relationship with other Christians. God had peeled away the defensive layers of his life so that the gospel could enter the very core of his being. He no longer feels alone. He now faces his struggles with a different spirit – a spirit of thankfulness, hope, assurance, and peace. What once would have defeated him, he simply puts in the hands of Jesus and trusts Jesus to provide a way through. Then he said with a kind of laugh, "I guess I just started to take Jesus seriously." I thought, "Seriously enough to laugh at what once would have now seemed impossible to overcome." The biblical scholar William Barclay wrote, "A person can endure anything so long as she has hope, for then she is walking not to the night, but to the dawn."

Mark awakens us to the abundant healing grace of God in Jesus. In Jesus, there is hope, life, and community for all. Meanwhile we let the gospel out in dribs and drabs like the disciples who tried to keep the children away from Jesus. We are stingy with what God so lavishly and freely gives. We worry about who deserves our help, our food, our time, our money, and our attention. We carefully calculate the conditions under which we will stoop to forgive someone. Meanwhile the Holy Spirit slips up behind us when we are least expecting it and pours out a river of grace upon us. It is a good thing that God doesn't ask the question did we deserve it before God sent the Son to save us and the Spirit to knock some sense into us.

Thirty years ago, my mother became so disoriented that she could not function in her own home. We, her children, did not know what to do or where to turn for help. All of us lived out of town. For some time, there had been signs that she was having trouble with her memory, but the serious decline in her mental functioning seemed to come quite suddenly. We took her to doctors in Columbia, Norfolk, and Johns Hopkins. Not able to be at home by herself, she came to live with us in Norfolk and later with my brother in Charleston. The exact cause of her illness remained a mystery. We worked and prayed for her physical and mental healing, but she had entered a world from which there seemed like there was no return. Like the woman with the flow of blood and like the dying young girl, she had become out of reach, untouchable, by modern medicine.

On the day she died, we gathered around her bed and shared with her our love, gratitude, and memories. When she could no longer remember, we remembered for her. Most importantly, God remember her for she too was a daughter of God. We gave thanks for God's hand upon her life. Only God's touch could enter the forbidden world of dementia and death and raise her to new life, whole again, in God's kingdom. A father's cry, a desperate woman's search for health, and a family gathered around a bed lead us to the healing grace of Christ. In the end, God saved her, healed her, made her whole again in the heavenly kingdom.

We all have our stories, our tales within a tale. Life is full of divine disruptions. We may be on the road to one thing, only to be taken in another direction. One life story interrupted by another and then continued again. In all the mixed-up stories of our lives, in all the confusion of our days, in all the twists and turns of life, one thing is certain: Jesus is on the loose in the world with divine power to restore life – abundant life for everyone.

*Jesus Christ, lover of all,
trail wide the hem of your garment.
Bring healing, bring peace.*