

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

A BLEEDING THEODICY

Mark 5:21-43

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Analysis by Joseph Justus van der Sabb

21 When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. 22 Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet 23 and 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." 24 So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. 25 Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. 26 She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. 27 She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, 28 for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." 29 Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. 30 Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" 31 And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" 32 He looked all round to see who had done it. 33 But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. 34 He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

35 While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" 36 But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." 37 He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. 38 When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. 39 When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." 40 And 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. 41 He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" 42 And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. 43 He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

DIAGNOSIS: despair, *des pere* (without hope)

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *It Doesn't Happen*
This bleeding woman was lucky enough to receive healing from Jesus, Alleluia, a One-Off Miracle! But that's not going to happen for us. Because let's be honest: Who really believes that this cancer or apathy or bipolarity or Downs Syndrome or diabetes or cluster headaches or obesity or infertility or addiction or paralysis or immorality or blindness or immanent death can be "healed"—actually HEALED—just by "grabbing ahold of Jesus' cloak" in true faith?? Yeah, maybe those half-wit pentecostal "faith healers" truly believe this. Maybe. But not us. Not really. "Anyway, even if a hypothetical miraculous healing could take place, it wouldn't happen to me or my loved ones."

But every once in a while... isn't it a nice fiction to wish that we—and our loved ones—could experience that sort of healing, witness that tender power, and even, **dare we hope it, be healed ourselves? But no.** This day too will pass us by without real healing. Our “conditions” will continue to cause us embarrassment, pain, loss of income, grief, social isolation, and eventually death. **We will live, and suffer, and die. It's an old story.**

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *It Couldn't Happen*

Faced with a text that boldly puts a Gideon's fleece on the floor and sees miraculous results, we feel faithless and abandoned. Hey now. Faithless? No way. Of course we believe... just not naively! At most, you know, one might hope for or anticipate some spiritual warm fuzzies (or some “inner peace”) when one turns to Jesus in one's hour of darkness. And hey, that can be pretty amazing too... it's just... it's just that it's no “Talitha cum!” In this day and age, you know, we just have to settle for mediocrity when it comes to miracles.

Perhaps, like the afflicted Job, we learn not to question God. “Thy ways are higher than mine. I'll back off and quit whining now. If all I can do is play T-ball, well, it's better than being paraplegic. And if I'm paraplegic, at least I'm not dead yet! So Thanks Be To God! Whoo hoo!”

Picture a spectrum: On the hot side are the faith healers and their feckless disciples: “Either you're healthy, wealthy, healed, and happy, OR poor, sick, damned, and depressed. IF only you believed MORE, even you could be healed.” On the cold side of the spectrum are the atheists, agnostics, and doubters who shrug and point to the path ahead: “Life IS pain; anyone who says otherwise is selling something.” And since each of those options seems, perhaps, a bit daunting, where are we left? Hell.

We're stranded with this luckless lukewarm, tepid position: "Sucks to be you, but God is with you, good luck."

Why don't the fleeces we put out bear healing into our homes? Why doesn't so much clutching at the tattered fabric that floats by on the winds of promise shore up our bleeding hearts? It's simple. We don't believe. We're unwilling: unwilling to reach out and touch his cloak, unwilling to believe it could really happen, unwilling to expect dramatic (or any) results when we pray (therefore unwilling to really pray), unwilling to be satisfied with mealy "warm fuzzies," unwilling to cry out, **unwilling to fall on our knees at his feet, unwilling to tell him the whole truth, unwilling to find out what might happen if ever we were willing!** Point blank: I am unwilling to be willing. It's like my will is bound for pain and failure!

And even if I *was willing*, I can't believe that healing would actually happen. Not to me. I live in this day and age. I'm no idiot.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *It'll Never Happen*

So what do we get? Desolation. He keeps on walking. He never comes to our home. He never gives us the time of day. He does not hear our great noise and commotion, does not see our weeping and loud wailing. He does not take us by the hand, restoring our life. **"How I long to comfort and gather and protect you as a hen her chicks, but you were unwilling."** (Matt. 23:37) Even worse than that, we're the dog that bites the hen that would feed it, to cross metaphors! Dead meat! **"And so your house is left to you—your pain, your terror—it's all yours!"** (Matt. 23:38).

PROGNOSIS: confidence, *con fides* (with faith)

Almost all of us do, or will, face our days and months and years of unutterable pain. Where is the Good News in that for me? That I know it will hound and confound me until I die?

That's supposed to be Good News?! That is Awful News! Enter the Great Theodicy! Time to hear why it is all this way, and how we can turn it around! Gather round, listen up! Listen up! Ahem... (desolate silence)! And that's just how it is folks!

(He said this because they were forever seeking to be justified—healed—on their own terms. His wrenching death on the cross was about to upend, finally and forever, all paltry schemes of self-making and every theodicy. From Friday afternoon onward, it is Life in Christ... or nothing.)

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : But He Did

Mark 1:41: **"I am willing... I do choose."** The House is not left to us alone... it is invadeable, pregnable by the right Thief. The Christ breaks into my house to subdue the Strong Man, to take what is precious for himself (Mark 3:27). The Tomb is likewise penetrable, pervious, porous... and Death thereby is remade into something very different from the Final Disastrous End that we fear... maybe more a doorway to another reality. Having been faced... Death is faceable now on Jesus' terms.

And Pain too. And Failure too. The past, the present, the future is determined by the One Who Holds the Keys of Life and Death... not by our success and our efforts, our health, our sanity, our adjustedness, our anything! Kipling saw it... "If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster and treat these two imposters just the same..." Good health and pain-peace of mind and afflictions of the soul—are just two imposters who must be treated just the same—neither locks us to Christ, neither separate us from his Love. Rather, the specs of Life are participation in Jesus' death and resurrection and the life of Promise-trusting that flows from that cruciform watery tomb.

Why is this comforting? Because in Christ—because in this pain—even I am safe in God. I am safe in God forever.

Even when (especially when) this pain feels like hell on earth.

Instead of abandoning her young, this mother hen comes from beyond death to gather again her chicks. The God-Man comes to a standstill in the middle of a crowded city and turns to look for you. He comes into the innermost holy places of your homes, where your hopes and dreams live and die. He is there at dawn and at 9am, at noon and in the afternoon. He watches and prays late into the night. And when he sees our noise and commotion, our weeping and anguish, he is there. He weeps. And then he reaches out to take your hand. **By his Spirit, through his Body, Jesus continues to comfort and gather and protect.**

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *And We Fall on Our Knees*

Countless millions who have “lost their faith” credit (blame?) the “problem of pain” and the “problem of evil.” As though their faith wasn’t capable of handling the depth or the intensity of these “intellectual” problems. But in what was their faith? In Whom? Trust in religion is quickly (and rightly) destroyed by the experience of pain and suffering. Religion seductively proposes that when the client adheres enough, gives enough, behaves well enough, is lucky enough, has the right insurance coverage, then salvation and healing can be dispensed through the little tube. But the blessing/healing/religion vending machine is broken. No wonder people lose faith in it. Trust in the Gospel, in Jesus, is not the same thing as trust in religion, doctrines, theodicies, rightness, and answers. Trust in Jesus, in other words: “If I’m going to be alright, you’re going to have to get me through this, one way or the other.” “I am yours, save me.” “Thy will be done.”

This calls to mind the words of Jesus himself, telling of two men who went to pray. The one came in preening pride to strut in public and make his pious proclamations. He came to declare how

right he was. How he had the right understanding of pain and suffering. "Sucks to be you, but Thank God I'm OK." The other came to fall on his knees before God and to simply tell the whole truth: **"I'm a sinner. Your Mercy is my only way out. Have mercy on me."** Talk about honesty. Talk about trust. Talk about humility! But what else can be said?

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : And "Get up" to New Life First things first: Run to Mom and Dad. Hug them. Then take up a tambourine and dance with fast bare feet and a child's joy of life into the company of those who mourn. Dissolve their grief into astonished, laughing joy. Then share food, and celebrate with wine and more dancing. And then, somehow, keep the news of these things quiet. Right. As though the tale of a funeral that became a party could be kept under wraps. Remember how eyes dark with despair wowed wide open? Remember how those once-dark eyes sparkled for joy for years to come whenever Jairus and his little girl walked down the street hand in hand? Remember how that Daddy loved his little girl? Remember how he said we should give her something to eat and then went on his way? Remember how we loved that girl all the more for whom she reminded us of?

Remember now how these things are the echo of the Blessed "One Who Comes in the Name of the Lord." We set our eyes on him, we put our faith in him. He takes our hand in his. The "bleeding" stops. Or it probably doesn't. It doesn't matter. From this moment, through all the steps of the dance, he will bring us **through** affliction and darkness and pain and death unto those White Shores, the broad green slopes of Aslan's Country, the golden streets of the New City of Peace; we live the life he gives... until, on that Day, our eyes are wow-ed, our joy is restored, and we dance and rest safe forever in green pastures beside still waters.

What does this New Life boil down to? We live, and suffer, and die for the good of others. That's what we get up to. The hen chuckles in pure delight. Her chicks are home. At last.