

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel, Year B

THE SECRET TRUTH OF JESUS' ABSENCE

Mark 5:21-43

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

Mark 5:21 When 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."

The lection continues in verses 35-43 with the story of Jairus and his daughter.

[Note: Mark's Gospel, written just after the fall of Jerusalem c.70-75, sought to answer the single greatest problem facing the Church, then as now, namely, what could it mean that Jerusalem has fallen and yet that Jesus, Israel's messiah-king, has not returned to establish the kingdom of God. The question was bluntly raised in 2:20, and answered obliquely at the end of the Gospel when, without any post-resurrection appearances, the women were told that Jesus had gone ahead of them to Galilee (16:5-8). Mark told his Gospel stories in lieu of those appearances in order to offer an answer to the "delay" in the parousia of Christ. In view of Jesus' resurrection, the one who had once been present and "touchable" was, in truth (as known then only to the spirits), the Son of God (as known now by the disciples; see 2 Cor 5:16!) who had at his command the power of God. Jesus' forgiveness of sins (2:5-12), healings (4:7) and rebuke of the sea (4:39-41) revealed to Mark's hearers (and to us) the then-secret truth about Jesus' ministry and death. When seen apart from Jesus' resurrection and future kingship—which is the putative assumption in the stories, Jesus is not recognized as the Son of God and his power is not recognized as the power of God. Mark's stories assume Jesus' lordship, and tell his hearers what they may expect of Jesus very soon (13:24-37) despite the fall of Jerusalem and the delay of Jesus' return. If this account of Mark's Gospel is somewhat correct, we should be able to see in his stories something of what the early church saw and understood about Jesus in light of his resurrection.]

DIAGNOSIS: Untouchable

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): The Absence of Jesus

The story of Jesus healing the woman with a hemorrhage (vv.

24-34) is a back-handed commentary on Mark's own day (and ours, for those of us not convinced in Steps 4 and 5) when a touchable Jesus is nowhere to be found. Without being able to "touch" Jesus (or in this case his clothes to which his person and power adhere), or to be touched by him, his astonishing "power" and his "kingdom" are not available to us. It's a problem; or so it may seem.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Means No One to Trust

Not having access to Jesus and to his power means that our future is indefinite. We are left to our own devices (against ourselves, against Rome, against God) in search for someone else to trust, to secure our future (health, Jerusalem, mercy), which alas only secures a future that ends in dis-ease, failure, and death. Apart from Jesus and his power, there is no one who can guarantee our future beyond such failures—which is the essence and end of dis-trust in God.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): So, Nothing has Changed

Without Jesus present among us, we and everyone else are in exactly the same place as we were before he arrived on the scene. That is, we are still in our "sins" (idolatry in infinite variety, unable to trust in God) and therefore God, as we know him in word and in deed (see Deut. 32:39), remains dead-set against us. God's wrath and judgment, both short-term and long-term, remain as strong as ever, with no respite in sight.

PROGNOSIS: Touchable

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Jesus' Absence is His Presence For Mark, Jesus' kingship (Messiah, King of the Jews, Son of Man, Son of God) was decisively established in his death and resurrection. His promise to "destroy the Temple" and

build a new one “in three days” (14:58; 15:29, 37-38; 16:6) must have rung hollow until it was actually destroyed (by Rome or God) in 70 CE. Was the clock now ticking towards Jesus’ return in glory (8:38–9:1; chs. 13, 14:62)? If this was Mark’s suggestive answer to the delay in Jesus’ parousia, it is clearly insufficient as an answer for us today. Yet even for Mark there was a problematic interim time, the time between now (c.70) and then (“three days”)—which for us is not unlike the time between Jesus’ resurrection and his expected parousia. Mark’s answer to this interim time is that Jesus’ power, his decisively important power, is the “forgiveness of sins” (2:10-11) and “faith” (v. 34). That forgiving “touch” is the one that really matters. It is the “touch” for which he died and was raised.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Making Room for Faith

It is true that Jesus is not touchable as he once was. In the story Mark tells about the woman who “touched” Jesus (or his clothes) and was healed, her new found “wellness” only hints at her true health—that is, her “faith” (v. 34) in Jesus. His address to her as “Daughter” (v. 34) signifies that she represents the children of Israel as a whole, and that her faith in him was her true healing or salvation (the Greek word for “has made you well” in v. 34 has both meanings). Here Mark is saying that Israel’s true salvation is not in Jerusalem, whether destroyed or not, but in her faith in Jesus. More to the point, for Mark and for us, it is precisely in the Temple’s destruction that her (and our) faith becomes most apparent. What is truly healing and salvific is not the state of Jerusalem but faith in Christ. Jerusalem’s destruction, like Jesus’ resurrection, makes room for faith.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): In Order to Love Each Other

For Mark, repentance and forgiveness and “peace” (v. 34) were

constitutive of Jesus' preaching (1:14). But Jesus also enacted his gospel through many healings and meal-sharings which extended the usual notion of family to include countless others. Jesus' disciples, and we, are called to do the same. When we offer healing to those who are suffering, and share our food with those who are hungry (see 6:37), we are inviting others to join the kingdom (or family) of God. In this way, the families that naturally care for each other grow a hundred-fold or more (3:31-35; 6:41-43; 8:6-8). We call it "church," and its power is in the gospel only. Jesus and his kingdom are thus present-to-the-touch through those whom he has healed and forgiven—that is, through us. For Mark, this is the secret truth of Jesus' absence.