



“A Tale of Two Daughters”
Scripture – Mark 5:21-43
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, July 1, 2018

It’s a good story. A darn good story ... like one Jesus would tell, if he weren’t at the center of it. As the Reverend David Lose points out, this story could be confused with a parable, if only it began with that familiar introduction: “The kingdom of God is like ...”¹

The kingdom of God is like two daughters — united first in suffering and death, and then in healing and new life. Two daughters of different fathers, but both precious to God. Two daughters who are restored to life, to community, to wholeness ... But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Our story begins with a deeply distressed father. Jairus is a leader in the synagogue — an upstanding citizen, a pillar of the community. But, today, he is bent low in grief. We find him crumpled at the feet of Jesus, pleading for his daughter’s life.

Who knows how he’d heard about this healer? Perhaps, over lunch with the Pharisees, Jairus had feigned outrage as his friends ranted about the carpenter’s boy who’d had the gall to cure a man on the Sabbath. But, really, Jairus’ ears had perked up, because — just that morning — he’d heard the rumble in his daughter’s chest. Or, maybe, he’d heard the rumors that had spread throughout town like wild mustard: “Did you hear? Jesus healed a paralytic! They say the man stood up and skipped out the door, like he was fixin’ to run a marathon.” However he came to know about this miracle worker, faith or hope or desperation propels Jairus to elbow his way through the crowd and fall at Jesus’ feet: “My daughter is dying! Lay your hands on her, so that she may live!”

Jesus does not delay. Without comment or question, he sets out — the crowd in hot pursuit, lest they miss the best show in town. But, before he can lay hands on the dying girl, a hemorrhaging woman reaches out for Jesus.

She shouldn’t have been there. Jewish law dictated that she must stay out of reach, away from the crowd — somewhere her bleeding body would not make others unclean.² Invisible to her community, nameless to the ages. But the woman had no choice. The physicians — with their fancy spices and expensive salves — had given up long ago, leaving her penniless and in pain. So, day-in and day-out, she’s relied on the pity of passersby, who avert their eyes from her blood-stained garments.

¹ David Lose, “Pentecost 6B: On Vulnerability, Need, and Hope.” Posted on ... *In the Meantime* on June 26, 2018 (www.davidlose.net).

² See, for instance, Number 5:2.

But this Jesus — he could change things; he could give her a life. So, this hemorrhaging woman — made bold by faith or hope or desperation — elbows her way through the crowd, for she thinks: “If I just touch his clothes, I’ll be made well.”

And she’s right — she *is* made well. Immediately. After twelve, long years of chronic pain and unrelenting shame, her affliction is healed in an instant. She’d forgotten what this feels like ... what it feels like to be well.

And Jesus senses it too. He pauses — the parade of followers bumping into his back, a perplexed Jairus wondering what-on-earth could be so important when his daughter’s life is on the line. “Who touched me?,” Jesus asks. And his disciples look at one another, thinking he must be joking. *Really, Jesus — in this crowd? Who hasn’t touched you?* But Jesus feels it in his body: a release of power that has healed the woman’s flow of blood. “Who touched me?”

The woman could have scurried away, like a pickpocket who had claimed her prize. After all, just touching Jesus’ robe has made her well. But, now, grace flows through her. She stands upright — in the middle of a crowd that has pushed her to the margins — and tells all: her sickness; her shame; her desperation; her desire. The woman reveals her whole truth to the One who can make her whole.

And Jesus — who has already cured this anonymous woman through a stolen touch— now utters healing words: “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.” *Daughter, you are no longer imprisoned by your affliction; you are free to return to your people. Daughter, you are healed in body and in spirit. Go forth rejoicing, for you are made whole.* With this blessing Jesus restores her to health, to full humanity. The once-hemorrhaging woman — who hides in the crowd so she can touch Jesus — is returned into the community’s embrace — a child of God, a daughter of Israel.

It’s a scene of such joy and celebration that we almost forget there’s more to come. That was just the first act! But, before the curtain can fall, disaster strikes. Bad news from Jairus’ house: his child is dead. As one daughter was being restored, another lost her life. “You’re too late,” his friends lament. “Why trouble the teacher any further?”

But Jesus *is* troubled by this parent’s pain. He whispers to Jairus: “Do not fear, only believe” — words that must have seemed so pointless in the midst of this crisis. But the father follows, wondering if Jesus has a trick up his sleeve that could ever relieve his pain.

When they arrive at the house, Jesus sends away the crowd — taking only Jairus and his wife, and three disciples, with him to the bedside. And, as they look upon the girl’s breathless body, Jesus finally heeds her father’s urgent plea: He takes the child by the hand and utters healing words: “Little girl, get up.” And, in an instant, Jesus lifts this daughter to life. Breath fills her lungs; blood floods her limbs. Her twelve-year-old body is healed. She rises from her deathbed and walks about. And her family can do nothing but look on in amazement. For their little girl has been returned to them — restored to life, restored to community, restored to wholeness.

This is what the kingdom of God is like. It’s like two daughters from two different worlds: one left to fend for herself in a world that has cast her aside; the other surrounded by family and friends who cannot save her. One for whom twelve years has felt so long, the other for whom twelve years is far too short. One who just wants to get close enough to touch Jesus’ robe; the other who languishes near death, awaiting the healing touch of Christ.

But both daughters are made well. Both are healed. Because Jesus is not afraid of these messy moments, of these deeply human moments ... where bodies bleed and die, leaving communities incomplete and families fractured. Jesus is not afraid of these moments, but inhabits them as the incarnate Word, divine love enfleshed in skin and bone. Jesus responds to those in need, not from a dispassionate distance, but up close — where he can touch and

be touched, where he can embrace others in all their suffering and all their joy. And, through his healing touch, Jesus restores these daughters to life, to community, to wholeness.

This is what the kingdom of God is like.

But what about in *our* time? What is the kingdom like in a world where the Son of God no longer walks among us? In a world where desperate women cannot elbow their way through the crowd to touch his robes, and grieving fathers do not watch Jesus take their children's hands, lifting them to life? What is the kingdom like in a world where pain persists and disease proves fatal? Where bodies do not rise from their deathbeds? Where resurrection and restoration seem a far-away hope ... a promise of a not-yet-realized future? What is the kingdom of God like in *this* world?

Yes, it's a harder to glimpse. But it's there ...

It's there wherever healing is possible, even if a cure isn't. Wherever hurting people are restored to community, and fractured families are made whole. It's there wherever Christ is present in the midst of messy, human moments. Where — even though we cannot reach out and touch Jesus — divine love is enfleshed in skin and bone. Where — by grace and the movement of the Spirit — God is near as we reflect Christ to one another.

Here's what the kingdom of God is like:

The kingdom of God is like a daughter returned to her mother's embrace, after years of alienation and pain. It's like a family that finds healing and wholeness, as hands reach out in compassion.

This story will sound familiar if you're a fan of the BBC show, *Call the Midwife*.³ This series follows a community of nurse-midwives as they serve the people of London's East End during the last years of the Baby Boom. It is the business of these women to be there for the beginning and end of life. So, their days are punctuated by the startled cries of newborn babes, and the halting breaths of dying neighbors. Needless to say, they inhabit life's messy moments.

One of the midwives seems an unlikely candidate for this work. Her name is Camilla, but everyone calls her Chummy ... much to her mother's dismay. You see, she was born to a life of privilege. The daughter of a dignitary and a socialite, Camilla grew up in the far reaches of the British Empire, reared by boarding schools and Indian governesses. She was groomed to step into London society, and live a life of comfort. The kind of life that requires a name that is beautiful, refined.

But Chummy chooses something different ... She has a heart for nursing, for tending to the broken and the bleeding. So she comes to this impoverished neighborhood, to serve people living — and dying — on the margins.

It's a life that is not good enough for her mother ... that will *never* be good enough for her mother. Lady Browne chided Chummy for moving to the East End — offended that her daughter would choose the company of the destitute over the society to which she was entitled. She was horrified when Chummy chose to marry a police officer, rather than someone befitting her rank. She balked when the pair named her grandchild after the handyman, rather than settling on something dignified. Chummy and Lady Browne have had a broken relationship, to put it mildly.

But then Lady Browne falls ill. Cancer. Turns out she has weeks to live.

³ BBC, *Call the Midwife*, Series 3, Episode 8 (2014).

Now, Chummy is accustomed to the bedside. After all, she spends her days ushering babies into this life, and easing the journey for those passing onto the next. But — when it comes to her mother — Chummy lets her fellow nurses handle the morphine injections. She watches from across the room as they hold the water glass to her mother’s lips, as they prop up pillows to make her more comfortable.

But her mother craves something more — some comfort in her final days.

“I used to have a manicure once a week in [India],” she reminisces. “We had Nivea cream sent over by diplomatic bag. I wouldn’t mind a manicure today.”

Her daughter is quick to retort: “You don’t want to bother with that fuss and nonsense.”

But later, one of her colleagues — a wise and elderly nun — sets a manicure kit before Chummy. She studies it for a moment, lifting the lid to gaze at the pink and red polish. “I can’t. I simply can’t,” says Chummy, as tears well up in her eyes. “I can’t touch her.”

But the wise and elderly nun knows the power of touch. She knows it’s the only thing that can bring healing in this moment, when the end is near and there is nothing else to do.

So Chummy returns to the bedside, where Lady Browne languishes on the brink of death. She lifts her mother’s hand, and gently rubs Nivea cream into the wrinkled skin. Then, takes the file, to shape her nails carefully into smooth, perfect curves. And, as Chummy begins to spread pink polish onto waiting fingertips, her mother reaches up to stroke her daughter’s hair.

“You’ve never done that before,” Chummy remarks.

“Oh, I have ... when you were very, very tiny.”

As hands reach out in love, there is healing ... not of the broken body that will no longer rise from this bed. But of a fractured family. These tender acts — a daughter lifting her mother’s hand, a mother reaching out to touch her daughter’s hair — restore the relationship between the two. It is enough to free Chummy from resentment and fear, so that she can utter healing words: “I love you. I love you.” It is enough to bring peace as Lady Browne takes her final, labored breaths and departs this life. It is enough to mend tormented souls so that, even in death, there is life to celebrate.

It seems God is there, in this messy, human moment. No — not in a way these women could reach out and touch. But — by grace and the movement of the Spirit — divine love is enfleshed in skin and bone. And through a loving touch, pain is healed and both mother and daughter experience wholeness.

This is what the kingdom of God is like: Hands extended. Hearts touched. Grace experienced, as people move beyond pain to embrace one another with healing love ... the kind of love that restores us to life, to community, to wholeness.

Look – Sisters and Brothers, Sons and Daughters – the kingdom of God is all around us. So close, you can reach out and touch it.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Eternal God, we give you thanks for your amazing creation, for your steadfast love, and for promising that neither life nor death, nor things present nor things to come, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from your healing love.

We give you thanks for Jesus Christ, our Lord, who by his life, death and resurrection opened to us the way of everlasting life – a way of life that begins in our earthly life, continually presenting opportunities for us to live according to the ways of your heavenly kingdom.

Loving God, as we approach a holiday established by our nation to remember the importance of liberty and justice for all, we pray that we may be faithful to you by using our freedom to follow the way that you have shown us in Christ.

Grant us the will to reject temptations of greed and materialism, of prejudice and racism, of apathy and indifference, so that we may reform our country on sound moral principles that work for the common good of our nation and for the collective good of all your children.

Lord, shake the leaders of our nation so that they may seek your wisdom, and clear their vision so that they may discern your desires for all people.

Loving God, we are very blessed to live in a land of liberty, help us to use our freedom to speak the truth, to promote justice for all, and to respond with compassion toward our neighbor. We know that these are the principles on which Jesus built his ministry, and these are the virtues you call us to embody.

Mighty God, the ministry of Jesus was a healing ministry. He was always seeking to heal the illnesses and wounds of those he encountered. May we carry on his ministry of healing, touching others with Christ-like compassion so that they – and we – may live in joy and in hope.

Now, here us as we join our voices together in the prayer he taught us to pray, saying, “Our Father...”