

A Bible Sandwich

Read Mark 5:21-43

A sermon at Elmer, June 27th, 2021

My late friend Alice told me years ago that what makes Philly cheese steaks and hoagies so good is not the meat but the bread. She attributed the distinctive taste of Philadelphia bread to the water, or should I say wooder? It probably is both. I remember a food joint in the Dallas airport purporting to offer a Philly cheese steak. I didn't even blink, just turned and walked away.

Our text today is what I call a Bible sandwich. It's a story within a story, sort of like cold cuts between two halves of a delicious roll. I want to look at both stories a little.

Let's start with Jairus, one of the leaders of the synagogue who fell at Jesus' feet begging for the life of his little daughter, who was near death. As a synagogue leader, he would have been well respected, a man with fine spiritual credentials, a man people looked to for spiritual guidance and wisdom. When disease and death come calling, none of that matters, whether you are clergy or lay. He was in the grip of a humbling vulnerability.

I can relate to this man very deeply because of my own experience. Some years ago, I came home from a session meeting to find my wife in real pain. I asked if she wanted to go the ER. Of course she said, "No, let's wait and go to our family doctor tomorrow." We waited. He sent us right to the ER with a diagnosis of appendicitis. It was about noon when we arrived. I called my friend who was a surgeon there to tell him we were headed to his hospital. He was out at his satellite office but called his intern telling him to meet us at the hospital and see to it that care was forthcoming. The intern decided he had other things more pressing.

We waited and waited. Hours passed and Jean's condition deteriorated rapidly. Finally I called my friend back and asked how close to death you needed to be to get care. He sped in, got things moving, but by that time, Jean's ruptured appendix was feeding a bad case of gangrene. She was, as the Dylan song puts it, "Knock, knock, knocking on heaven's door."

It was about 1 am when she finally was in the recovery room. I went through the gamut of emotions that night: fear, desperation, and later a great deal of gratitude, and later still, a great deal of anger. Obviously she made it through; there she is, thank God. I can still feel some of the old anger at their neglect that day and night, though I'm mostly just thankful for the kindness and diligence of my dear friend who surely saved her life, with help from the Lord of course.

How Jairus must have felt that day! Surely he must have been grateful that Jesus consented to come to his daughter even when pressed in on every side by a large admiring crowd with needs and expectations of their own. Amidst the clamor and enthusiastic admiration, Jesus had directed his focus toward Jairus' need. He must have felt an upwelling of hope because of Jesus' compassionate response to his plea. The famous rabbi had noticed him. But then he must have become deeply frustrated, even angry, at the delay caused by this woman who dared to interrupt this parade with her own needs.

Why couldn't Jesus see the urgency here? This woman had been suffering for twelve years. Surely she could have waited a little longer, survived until later, but no, Jesus could not let it go. When she touched his garment, her desperate need coupled with an expectant faith caused a power surge of healing to go forth from Jesus. He felt it and knew something important was going on, something worth the time, the pause, the delay on his way to take care of a little girl who was sick unto death.

I've been binge reading crime novels by Lee Child featuring his fictional character Jack Reacher. Reacher is a retired MP who carries only a passport, a credit card, a toothbrush, and some cash as he travels around America seeing what he can see. And of course, he always comes across some hapless victims, little people being bullied by the evil bad guys. Reacher administers justice to them, maybe not as mercifully as we hope God will do it to sinners like us, but it's fun to see them get what's coming to them nonetheless. Reacher's guiding principle as he encounters the little people that others deem unimportant, even expendable is, "everyone matters or no one matters." He learned that from his mother, not Jesus, but it seems like a Christ-like guiding principle: everyone matters, or no one matters.

On that day so long ago, in Jesus' eyes, Jairus mattered, his daughter mattered, but so did this poor woman who had been suffering for twelve long years, who had spent everything she had trying to find healing right up to the very edge of utter destitution.

There was a fine theologian and spiritual writer in the middle of the last century named A.W. Tozer. He spoke about what he called the tyranny of the immediate in the spiritual life. He noted how our lives get filled up with all kinds of things that seem urgent, that demand our immediate attention or else.....or else what? Often we don't stop to answer that question. So we often are consumed by anxious striving and totally miss what God is up to in our lives.

Another fine spiritual writer named Oswald Chambers said, "The good is the enemy of the best." His point was that sometimes we miss what's really important. We often miss God's will simply because we have our own ideas about what is good, never considering that there might be some higher good and purpose right in front of us. Chambers wrote the spiritual classic, My Utmost for His Highest.

Have you ever noticed Jesus never seems to be in a hurry? He doesn't cater to the tyranny of the immediate. With my tongue firmly in my cheek, I've said from time to time that God often seems to be late for the appointments I have made for God. Jairus had a very real, intense, personal need. His situation was urgent and immediate. Right in the midst of that urgency, Jesus stopped and said, "Who touched me?" Jairus along with the rest of the disciples must have thought, "Everyone is touching you, but don't let it slow you down! We need to hurry. My daughter is dying!"

But everyone matters, or no one matters. The furtive touch of a desperate woman was important to Jesus. I'm sure she would have been quite content to take her secret healing and inconspicuously fade into the crowd. But saving faith, healing faith, was and is supremely important to Jesus. It was not just good. It was the best! And when he found it, he was going to take time to lift it up for all to see. This is how the Kingdom of God works, he might have said. A whole crowd of people got to see an amazing healing. Nobody but Jesus could have done it. Not only that, but Jesus loved the woman enough to not allow her to

slink away feeling guilty for stealing her healing. She needed to know she was really loved and her healing was a free gift.

Just then the bearers of bad news arrived. Don't trouble the teacher anymore Jairus; your daughter is dead. Call the mourners. Call the funeral director. Let the family make arrangements. But Jesus' counsel to Jairus was, "Don't be afraid; only believe." Put yourself in Jairus' shoes for a minute. What would you believe, the bearer of very sad news, or Jesus who said, "Don't be afraid"?

By the time they reached the house, the mourners were already out in full force raising a loud lamentation for the dead girl. I'm sure Jairus response to the news that his daughter had died was, "We're too late! All hope is gone. If only we could have hurried up we might have made it in time!" Everyone knew for certain that the little girl was dead. Jairus' pleading and hoping and urging Jesus to help had all been for naught. That's what he thought. That's what you would have thought too.

I had a parishioner once who died suddenly of a heart attack while riding his lawn mower. He wasn't too old. He and his wife both had strong faith. I was summoned to the hospital where he lay dead, surrounded by his wife and several family members. She asked if someone would please pray for him to be raised from the dead, or more accurately I guess, resuscitated. I had too strong of a conviction of what my eyes were seeing. I should have simply prayed the prayer. Instead, I just stood there solemnly present but closed mouthed. After an awkward silence, her son-in-law said a prayer asking that his life return. Nothing happened. She thanked him and we quietly departed. She believed the scripture that says we don't have because we don't ask; she wasn't about to walk away and be haunted by regrets that she had not believed enough to ask, even when the reality of her husband's death was staring us all in the faith. We buried him a few days later.

Listen in again to the verses that describe the situation for Jairus who led Jesus to his home under a growing cloud of sorrow:

When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he (Jesus) saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered

the house, he said to them, 'Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside.

There are several times in Jesus' ministry of healing that he takes people away from crowds filled with unbelief. It's as though, when there is a high degree of unbelief surrounding a person in need, the atmosphere is too toxic and cluttered with doubt. Sometimes I think Jesus is creating a protective shield around the person being healed to spare them public scrutiny and even scorn. Maybe we all could use a safe space sometimes to believe the unbelievable. And sometimes Jesus is cloaking who he is and what he is doing so people don't simply follow him for signs and wonders and free fish and bread. It's an evil generation that demands a sign, then demanding another and then another. Jesus knew that The Sign that would save the world and her sinners was the sign of the Cross. It was the sign that too few then and now are eager to embrace. The Cross is expensive!

In the years I've walked with Jesus, not only have I learned that Jesus never seems to be in a hurry, never seems to be in a frantic race against circumstances. I've also learned that you just never know what Jesus is going to do. Our life with Jesus Christ can be and should be full of surprises. And mine has become just that, a life full of surprises.

I've come to believe what the Bible says repeatedly, "With God all things are possible." Why else would we pray about our most heartfelt needs if we don't believe that? It doesn't mean that all things are probable. Many prayer requests ask for things that are highly improbable. The trick is to hold our faith open, to ask God for what we want or need, and then watch what happens.

In the situation I just shared about a brand new widow, she believed in the improbable more than I did at that time and was not ashamed to ask. Even though the outcome was as I expected, she was more right to make her request known to God. Childlike faith can look like presumption, but it is not. Whether or not our prayers are answered just the way we want is not the central point. What is the point is that expectant and trusting faith pleases the Lord. Trusting God is

one true way to honor God, every bit as much as praising God and giving God thanks in all circumstances.

In this text this morning, in what I have called a Bible sandwich, we have two very remarkable stories, one which unfolds inside another. Both stories are about people standing at the precipice of human need. Both seek healing from Jesus and both receive it in surprising ways. What do you need at this time in your life? Will you risk making your request known to God? You just never know what God will do for you when you trust God with everything that concerns you.