

# *Fringe Benefits*

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June 27, 2021

Mark 5:21-43

<sup>21</sup>When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. <sup>22</sup>Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet <sup>23</sup>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.”

<sup>24</sup>So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. <sup>25</sup>Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. <sup>26</sup>She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. <sup>27</sup>She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, <sup>28</sup>for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” <sup>29</sup>Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. <sup>30</sup>Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” <sup>31</sup>And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” <sup>32</sup>He looked all around to see who had done it. <sup>33</sup>But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. <sup>34</sup>He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

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

The crowd stood right there, at the edge of the water; their Birkenstocks getting wet as the waves lapped at their feet. It's doubtful that Jesus had made it ten feet from the boat when the local official approached him on his knees. And of course Jairus was a somebody.

His identification by Mark tells us that he was more than a run-of-the-mill lay leader, he was wealthy, well-connected and well-heeled. Respectable. Which makes his anguished act even more startling. Respectable gentlemen neither grovel nor kneel.

But Jairus' face dispensed with any respectability. His daughter is dying. Jesus the healer needs to come now. Jesus saw the look in this father's eyes. The look of a desperate parent, who will go to any length necessary to save their child.

The beach was packed, so these two characters—the synagogue leader and the rabbi from Nazareth—have to weave through the crowd to find the worn path that leads into the town.

They didn't make it another ten feet before desperation finds Jesus again. This time it's someone without a name; a woman, suffering for twelve years from an affliction that has driven her to this last ditch effort. Poked and prodded by the medical community, she did not get better, only worse. A reasonable reading would indicate that her condition of hemorrhaging blood had not only kept her physically unwell, but had also made her ritually unclean. When it came to her life within the society, she was as good as dead.

Her relationship to commerce was gone. She couldn't go into La Colombe (even with a mask). She couldn't get a loan at Bryn Mawr Trust. She couldn't even step into Wawa for a hoagie. But more importantly, she couldn't show up at her church on a Sunday, or stop by her family's after for dinner. *Persona non grata*.

Or as the Southern Gothic writer, Flannery O'Connor, says it in one of her short stories, the woman is a "displaced person." A character in O'Connor's story of the same name explains, "it means they ain't where they were born at and there's

nowhere for them to go—like if you was run out of here and wouldn't nobody have you.”<sup>1</sup>

And so when we get to v.27 we encounter those words that still get caught in our throats, “But she had heard about Jesus.”

She comes up behind him; behind the movement of the story; from the backside of the main characters, the ones with names, and in the frenzy of the pressing crowd she touches Jesus' robe. Matthew and Luke recall a particularity of the miracle.

In their telling, the woman touches the hem of his garment, the fringe of his cloak. In a moment of authorial omniscience, we hear her inner thoughts, “If I can just touch his clothes, I'll be healed.” And immediately, the bleeding stops.

Simultaneously Jesus knows something has happened. In what was surely a comical moment for the crowd, Jesus asks aloud, “who touched me?” The disciples dismiss the remark. The *Common English Bible* continues, “But Jesus looked around carefully to see who had done it.” And knowing she had been caught, the woman kneels before Jesus, just as Jairus had done, though seemingly asking forgiveness instead of permission.

One commentary notes, “She already knows of his power to heal...she now fears what might happen to her if Jesus directs his power to curse, by exposing her only recently cured cultic uncleanness to the crowds.”<sup>2</sup>

But he does not need to forgive her. Instead Jesus gives her the only name by which she is recorded in the scriptures. “Daughter,” he says, “your faith has made you well. Go, in peace, healed from your affliction.” Then he keeps walking toward town.

Scholars call this an intercalation. It's a rhetorical technique in which one story is enveloped, essentially sandwiched, inside another. When the word is used

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<sup>1</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*. New York: 1971, 199.

<sup>2</sup> *The Common English Bible Storyteller's Bible*. Nashville: 2017, 1347.

in chemistry, intercalation means guest molecules are inserted into a host, the host accommodates it, but the process can be reversible without permanently changing the host. But not here. In this story, or set of stories, the characters are interrelated, bound together by time and meaning. One is essential to understanding the other.

The little girl, Jairus' daughter, was twelve years old when Jesus enters her home. He brings her back from death with a touch of his hand and words that while curt in their English translation, are tender in their Aramaic context. "Little girl, get up."

Twelve years old. The same age and span of years that the unnamed woman has been suffering from an incurable hemorrhage. Yet it is the desperation of both characters, Jairus and the woman, which haunts the text. What does it mean to be healed? What lengths will we go to for healing? Who merits the mediating presence of Jesus, anyway?

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Questions of merit have long been at the forefront—not just of religious endeavors—but of human measurements. Do people get what they deserve? Such language is infused within the idealism of what we have come to call the American Dream. If we will only work hard enough, anything is possible. Success can be ours, as long as our personal drive is high enough to accomplish it. At least, that's what we tell ourselves.

Our deeply entrenched belief in meritocracy as the great leveling field of opportunity is as old as the republic. It is a secular kind of providentialism. We work hard, and our success is the proof, not only of our work ethic, but by extension, of our virtue. Our self-reliance and self-rising indicate our merit. The rich deserve their riches because they have earned it. The poor deserve their poverty because they haven't earned anything.

Yet we know better. The facts bear it out. The growing levels of economic inequality in this nation are dizzying. If you are born to poor parents in this country, you are most likely to stay a poor as an adult. Most of our gains in national income over recent decades have gone to the top 10%, while the bottom half received a net benefit of close to zero.

A 2012 study by the Pew Trusts notes that of those born at the bottom fifth of the ladder of opportunity, most will not even rise to the middle class.<sup>3</sup> What happens when the approach to national inequality is not a promise of greater equality, but an often elusive promise of greater mobility? A better way to ask it might be the way Jesus frames a set of parables, *who counts?*

We see it in the political discourse of our day. Conversations about welfare often center around who is deserving of its benefits. Personal responsibility becomes a litmus test for self-worth. But as the political philosopher, Michael Sandel, writes, “It is one thing to hold people responsible for acting morally: it is something else to assume that we are, each of us, wholly responsible for our lot in life.”<sup>4</sup>

His most recent work entitled *The Tyranny of Merit*, is subtitled with a question: *What’s Become of the Common Good?* Excoriating the political left and the right alike, Sandel’s writing is penetrating, and insightful as it is disturbing. For Sandel the tyranny of merit has deeply distorted our self-understanding and our ability to engage in true civic dialogue that enhances the common good. It is too simplistic to see each other as the sum of our merits. Do we only get what we deserve? Should we? Is our lot in life of our own doing?

What does any of this have to do with this gospel text?

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Perhaps one of the reasons that Mark tells this story of two healings is to cause us to pay attention to who deserves healing, and what healing looks like.

As the writer of Ecclesiastes writes, “Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, not the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all.”<sup>5</sup> Sometimes life just happens to us.

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<sup>3</sup> “Pursuing the American Dream: Economic Mobility Across Generations,” Pew Charitable Trusts, July 2012.

<sup>4</sup> 34-35.

<sup>5</sup> Ecclesiastes 9:11

Yet this is a gospel text that invites us to explore healing in its dimensions that are not as dramatic or obvious. What happens when healing is more than just curing? Or what happens when our prayers aren't answered in the ways we had hoped?

The woman in the crowd reaches through the web of robes and cloaks and barely catches the edge of Jesus. Yet her healing is partial, even in the cessation of bleeding. It becomes complete when Jesus speaks with her. He deals with the social dimension of healing.

Jesus displays to the crowd that here is a woman who belongs. His words to her, *Go in peace*, re-integrate her back into community—materially, socially, politically, and spiritually. In this scene, Jesus heals her by restoring her dignity and identity. As the text says in the Greek, her trust in Jesus has *saves* her.

Which leads me to wonder what we, as Jesus' bewildered disciples, should do when we encounter the brokenness of the world?

“But she had heard about Jesus.” What had she heard? What have others in our world today heard? Or what have they heard about us? “But she had heard about Bryn Mawr.” “But he had heard about Presbyterians.” What do people know when they encounter the church? What is our role?

Biblical scholar Emerson Powery asks, “Can the Christian community alter the conditions of people's lives? Can it, too, bring healing into troubled circumstances? Must it not also cross boundaries — whether they are related to ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation, politics or any other boundaries that divide our society — and advocate life-giving meaning and change?”<sup>6</sup>

If we really want to follow Jesus, then we can't just gather at the lakeshore to welcome him with hosannas. We have to pay attention to who is in the crowd with us.

We have to walk to the house where dying children and grieving parents live. We have to speak for those who have been silenced; listen to those who are finding

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revision-common-lectionary/ordinary-13-2/commentary-on-mark-521-43-3>

their voice; pray with those who bow their heads; and work for those who have been left behind by systems, principalities, and powers.

Who did Jesus come to save? According to this text, he saves the young and the old, the powerful and powerless, the ones with a bright future and those who are at the end of their rope. There is enough time, power, compassion, and grace to go around so that no one is written off. Our task is to go where he goes, restore how he restores, and love how he loves.

Because when it comes to Jesus, everyone gets fringe benefits. Amen.