

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
June 11, 2023 – The Second Sunday after Pentecost  
Matthew 9:18-26 – The Healing of the Hemorrhaging Woman and the Raising of Jairus' Daughter  
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The second section of this morning's lesson from Matthew's Gospel is an interesting example of what New Testament scholars call "intercalation," which means the enclosing or "sandwiching" of one story within another, so that each affects the interpretation of the other. You will see what I mean as we consider the two stories: the account of Jairus' daughter whom Jesus raised from death which surrounds the account of the healing of the hemorrhaging woman. We'll begin with the story in the middle.

The healing of the woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years is unique among the biblical accounts of Jesus the healer. In the other accounts we have, healing was requested of Jesus directly. Crowds of sick people followed Jesus wherever he went so that they could meet him face to face and ask to be healed. The friends of the paralytic man lowered him through the roof so that he could be in the presence of Jesus the healer. Blind Bartimaeus called out to Jesus repeatedly, ignoring the disciples who told him to be quiet, until Jesus approached him directly. Sometimes a person who was well requested that Jesus heal someone else – the father of an epileptic boy, the centurion whose slave Jesus healed at a distance. Moved by compassion and full of the power of life from God, Jesus healed when he was asked to heal.

The woman with the flow of blood did not think she could meet Jesus face to face and request him to touch her with his healing hands. According to Jewish religious law anyone with a discharge of vital bodily fluid, such as blood, was regarded as ritually unclean. That meant that this woman could not enter the Temple or take part in religious rituals. It also meant that family and friends should avoid touching her, or her clothes, or a bed where she had slept, or a chair where she had sat (Leviticus 15:19-27). In her culture this woman with a hemorrhage was socially isolated. She should not even have been in the crowd. She certainly did not feel she could ask to be touched by Jesus.

But the woman had heard about Jesus and had faith that just touching his clothes would heal her. So, she "came up behind him" in the crowd and touched "the fringe of his cloak". An interesting detail was that she touched the fringe of his cloak, not the fabric. The woman touched the very margin of Jesus' clothing. In a crowd it is unlikely that someone would know that another person touched the fringe of his or her garment. Jesus must have sensed that something powerful had happened. Jesus was not angry with the woman for daring to touch his garment. He looked on her with compassion, encouraged her, and commended her faith: "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." By these words Jesus affirms her physical healing and acknowledges her place in a family, his family, the family of those who have faith. By healing her body Jesus restored to this woman her place in life among her family and friends. The account of the story in the middle is now finished.

Let's consider the story which surrounds this one, the story of Jairus' daughter. Jairus was an important leader in his synagogue. He approaches Jesus face to face, to beg him to raise his daughter from death. They are going to Jairus' house when they are interrupted by the hemorrhaging woman. After healing the woman, they make their way to Jairus' house where the customs of mourning are being followed – flute players and a crowd lamenting the child's

death. After sending the crowd away, Jesus took the dead girl by the hand and raised her from death, literally giving life in the place of death.

The two “sandwiched” stories differ in some ways – Jairus approaches Jesus directly to beg for his help while the woman approaches Jesus from behind, only hoping to touch his clothing; the woman has been afflicted for a long time, twelve years, while Jairus’ daughter was (according to the parallel account in Mark’s Gospel) a little child who had perhaps been ill only for a short time; Jairus was an important member of the religious community, while the woman was excluded from her community. Several differences, but much more important similarities – the faith of the people seeking Jesus’ help and especially Jesus’ power to heal and to give life.

The literary technique of intercalation – sandwiching one story within another so that each story can add depth of interpretation to the other – is interesting from a writer’s point of view. But as I thought about this passage from Matthew, I realized that the shape of our lives and the work of our lives are similar to this technique.

Think of the middle of the “sandwich” first. Here are all the layers of our lives – childhood, education, careers, relationships, engagement with the world and with the church, all the important aspects of how we have spent our time. Each of these layers affects the others, choice by choice, layer upon layer, forming us as persons and creating our character. In the middle of the “sandwich” of our lives we surely experience afflictions, as the woman with the hemorrhage did. We may have diseases or injuries that keep us from fully living for a time, until we are well again. The pain of grief or loss – and there are so many losses that give pain! – may cripple us for a time. An encounter with evil may be one or more layers of the “sandwich.” Going off the track to God – sin, if you will – may make up other layers of our lives. Like the woman with the hemorrhage, we may suffer for many years from the afflictions of life. People of faith are not spared from them.

Yet, that is only the middle of our stories. The larger context is life, full life, life that has come from God and is going to God. The beginning of our stories is the gift of life itself – to use the “sandwich metaphor,” this is the first piece of bread. God created us. And the end of our stories is new life, resurrection from death. Jesus calls death “sleep.” Sleep is temporary, isn’t it? After the death of our bodies, by God’s power we will be awakened to new life with God, eternal life with God. This life is the other piece of “bread” in the sandwich, the bread of heaven.

It can be challenging to hold onto our faith in the bread – the life – which has come from God and is going to God, especially when we are in the midst of afflictions in our lives and when there is so much suffering in the world and when the forces of darkness are clearly powerfully at work. Sometimes we need to work at our faith. I also think it is important – especially for those of us who have many layers in the sandwiches of our lives – to try to make sense of the entire sandwich, as it were. Where have we been blessed? Where have we encountered what is ungodly? Where have we needed to repent? How have all these layers of life informed one another? How might we commit our full stories to God? If St. Paul was right when he said that “all things work together for good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28), what can we do to ensure that all the layers of our lives work together to lead to goodness, to love, and to life?

We are called to trust in God’s goodness and God’s power to heal and to bring life, even out of death. We are called to hold on to God and the promises of God. We are called to do what we can to show the world the compassionate, healing love of Christ and to bring others hope. May God grant us the strength and grace to respond to this call. In Jesus’ name. Amen.