

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 8
RCL Lectionary, Year B
Wisdom 1:13-15; 2:23-24 / Psalm 30 / 2 Corinthians 8:7-15 / Mark 5:21-43
June 28th, 2009

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

(More) Lessons in Faith
by **The Rev. Richard E. Helmer**

Our gospel this day is a remarkable passage, as it poses to us two memorable stories of healing -- one nested in the other. I don't think it all a mistake or even a moment of sloppy literary skill that poses the scene in the crowd between Jairus' request and Jesus arriving at his house. Mark, for all of this gospel's efficiency in disclosing to us who Jesus is, wants us to sit and pray with this remarkable contrast of narrative -- to take in the incredible disparity of position between Jairus and the nameless woman in the crowd, and the one thread that connects them: the thread of faith. There is a profound lesson there -- one of deep grace.

So many who approach Jesus for healing in the gospels demand some action from him -- whether it's instruction, a visit, or a prayer of the Son of God. In this way, the contrast between Jairus, a faithful leader of the local synagogue, and the woman suffering for so long at the margins of her community, could not be more striking. Jairus is presumably respected -- so much so, everyone in town turns out to see what will be the outcome of his daughter's illness and how Jesus will respond to his request. Everyone knows Jairus' name. But the woman who suffers from hemorrhaging, rendered constantly ritually unclean and therefore likely an outcast, has no name and is virtually invisible. What they share is a common vision that they are now rendered powerless --- Jairus by his daughter's grave illness; the woman by her having spent everything on physicians who could not help her.

Both learn that faith's day is truly when we find ourselves up against the ineffable mystery of our constant vulnerability. . .When we are most open to God because all our human power is rendered useless.

Yet there is a peculiar and fascinating edge the woman seems to have in this over Jairus, for she is the one who receives from Jesus nothing less than commendation for her faith. She is the one who demands essentially no action of Jesus, takes an enormous risk by merely reaching out her hand, forges relationship with the divine with a humility that should -- in many respects -- silence the lot of us. Jairus' daughter will be raised up, too, of course, in a great public spectacle. But the woman lost in the crowd is the one who possesses the faith that has made her well, a faith truer, deeper, and broader than the well-healed and well-positioned. When she comes to Jesus with fear and trembling, it might

be because she fears to be scolded or worse for making Jesus unclean with her touch. Or perhaps because she has been an opportunist, seizing the moment of the pressing crowds and the hope stoked up around Jesus, Jairus, and his sick daughter. Or perhaps it is simply fear of reaching out without permission or even acknowledgment. Or perhaps. . .perhaps it is because at last she has come face to face with God and turned herself utterly over, undone to the core and at last re-made from the inside out physically, spiritually, and emotionally by grace.

Those of you who were here last week may remember Jesus scolding the disciples, even, for their lack of faith as they were tossed about in a boat by the storm. Yet again, by contrast, we witness this nameless woman and see her faith commended. It seems that she stands, in Jesus' eyes, head and shoulders above the rest. And with that, we are reminded that our God sees the world turned almost 180 degrees from our perspective. The least powerful, the most in need, are those most noticed by grace, most vulnerable to it, most ready to embrace it. Jairus needs to be told to continue -- to stay the course of faith. The woman needs to be told nothing.

So then, what is faith? Far from simple blind assent or setting aside intellect, faith is, of course, founded ultimately in relationship. But it is the final hope, too, of those who are the least among us. It is the complete undoing of all sense of power over ourselves, and a giving up of everything to a God -- however dimly we may perceive that God -- who will. . .well, who knows what God will do?

From this woman we learn what it truly means to fear God. Not so much to fear God's wrath as some might have us. But to fear God's love. A radical love that does not simply demand a little or even a lot, but *everything*, down to our last shred of hope. And then remakes us and restores us to a vision that only God could hold. . .that God holds for all of us. . . and all of creation until time is no more, death is undone, and we behold our Maker face-to-face.

Amen.