

Mark 5:21-43

When Illness Becomes Wellness

February 2, 2020

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

The picture on the screens is one of the images that came up in my Google search of the word, “multitask.”

I wonder if there is anything about this picture that resonates with you. Is there something about the man being pulled in multiple directions, dividing his attention between several tasks, that seems familiar? I like to think I’m pretty good at multitasking. I answer emails while I’m talking on the phone. I listen to podcasts when I’m driving. I catch up on the news while I’m cooking dinner and complaining about cooking dinner dinner. That’s three things at once! How about you? Are you a skilled multitasker? What’s your best example of your most awesome multitasking skills?

Well, it turns out, scientists have discovered that human beings are really not as good at multitasking as we think we are. According to Dr. Earl Miller, a neuroscience professor at MIT, we are only fooling ourselves if we think we can truly multitask. What his research has shown is that we can’t focus on more than one thing at a time, but rather, we shift our focus from one thing to the next with astonishing speed. Miller says that switching from task to task, we think we’re actually paying attention to all the things. But we’re not. We’re just switching between them very rapidly.

<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=95256794>

Have you ever driven while talking on the phone or listening to a podcast and arrived at your destination or a certain milestone in your trip and thought to yourself, “How did I get here?” Yeah, me too. We really don’t divide our attention as well as we think we do. Because of that, we have to prioritize. Sometimes we consciously set our priorities and sometimes our brain does it for us, without us even realizing it. That’s why we end up at our destination and can’t remember how we got there. Life, and the busyness of life, is overwhelming, and sometimes it feels like our only choice is to do everything at once because it’s all important. It seems easier to try to do all the things at once than it is to decide this thing or that is really the most important and just focus on that. Some days it feels like we

move from one fire to the next, certain each fire has the potential to burn the house down.

I wonder if that's the kind of experience the author of Mark wanted us to imagine as we read today's story.

This is 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.

As you heard the story, when you realized there were two people in need of Jesus’ immediate attention, did you get that feeling in the pit of your stomach...you know the one...when you feel like you need to be in two places at once or when you realize there are two, equally important things, or even people, who are competing for your attention? I imagine Jesus feeling that way. He had just stepped off the boat from his trip across the Sea of Galilee where he had saved a Gentile man who was living alone among the tombs because he was possessed by demons. Perhaps part of the crowd gathered on the shore had already heard the news that, on Jesus’ command, the demons left the man and entered a herd of pigs. Maybe it was other stories of Jesus working outside boundaries in unexpected places and people that brought Jairus, on behalf of his daughter, and the woman who was bleeding to Jesus. Whatever brought them there, Jesus was in the midst of a crowd, hurrying to Jairus’ house, when he was stopped cold.

This story is a story within a story and the two stories have a number of parallels. Perhaps the most obvious are that in both stories someone is healed, and in both stories that someone is female. In addition, both the woman who was bleeding and the girl who had a brush with death were ritually unclean according to Jewish law. The girl was unclean because she was dead by the time Jesus got to her. The woman was unclean because anyone bleeding, including a menstruating woman, was unclean. I think it’s important for us to understand that the fact that the woman and the girl were unclean did not mean they had done something wrong. Sin was one cause of ritual impurity, but there were others, including the two before us today-coming in contact with death and coming in contact with blood.

There are other parallels between the two stories. They both include the number 12, which is a significant number in Jewish tradition because there were 12 tribes of Israel. In the stories, the woman had been bleeding for 12 years and the girl was 12 years old. Also, both the woman and the girl were regarded as “daughters.” The girl was Jairus’ daughter and the woman was called, “Daughter” by Jesus. And both experienced healing through touch-one touched Jesus’ cloak,

the other was touched by Jesus' hand. The author really did a masterful job of weaving these stories together.

But, with so many similarities, why bother to tell both stories? What do the two stories, told side by side have to teach us? There are some differences between the stories that might provide answers to those questions. First, there was quite a disparity between Jairus' social position and the social position of the woman who touched Jesus' cloak. Jairus was an official of the synagogue, with authority, privilege, power, and probably more money than most within the Jewish community. The woman was, first of all, a woman on her own. She was poor, the text says she, "spent all that she had," trying to get well, and because nothing had worked, she remained ritually unclean. These things together meant she was powerless and isolated and they underscore her absolute vulnerability within the society. She was the exact opposite of Jairus. The story of the vulnerable woman and the story of Jairus's daughter set next to each other teach us that in the kingdom of God, the needs of the marginalized and vulnerable must be met before the needs of the celebrated and powerful.

This idea would have been met with considerable resistance in Jesus' day. People who had money, position, and power expected that their needs would come before the needs of people without resources. Frankly, the same is true in our world today. Specifically, in the United States we live in the tension of what *we have been taught* about the American Dream, available to everyone, if we just work hard, and the *reality* that the American Dream is just not working for everyone. The disparity between the ones who are wealthy and the ones who are poor continues to grow, with grim consequences, especially for the ones who are most vulnerable—the very young and very old.

I wonder what these side by side stories have to teach us about how we, as Christians, ought to feel about and respond to, for example, the differences in this country between the schools in which children who live in poverty are educated and the schools in which children from affluent homes are educated. This disparity is a result of the way we fund public education and it is in direct contradiction with the ways of Jesus taught in today's text, where the needs of the marginalized and vulnerable are prioritized.

Think of the most vulnerable people you know. Why are they vulnerable? Because of their economic status, skin color, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, immigration status? Now, consider how we, as a nation, treat that group of people. Do we put their needs first? Do we center their stories as we argue about the things that are truly life and death for those groups?

Well, Jesus did. The kin-dom of God does. Over and over again in Jesus' life he chose the ones who were marginalized, forgotten, and left out. Jesus prioritized the vulnerable woman who touched the hem of his cloak over his rush to get to Jairus' daughter. It wasn't that the little girl wasn't important, she was. But of the two of them, the woman was the most vulnerable, with no resources, no community around her, advocating for her.

And in spite of the fact that he had another "fire" waiting for him, Jesus stopped and really saw the woman, "Who touched my clothes?" he asked. The text tells us she was afraid...with good reason. She was unclean and had intentionally touched his garment. The text doesn't deal with this, but I imagine she touched others too. It's hard to be in a crowd and not touch other people. I wonder how others in the crowd reacted when they learned someone who was ritually unclean was in their midst. Were they angry? Did they immediately back away from her? She was used to that. She was used to being on her own. Jesus didn't react with anger as the original audience of this text would have expected. He stopped walking and he gave her a name, "Daughter."

Jesus' response to the woman teaches us something else about the priorities within the kin-dom of God. The action in the story completely stops while Jesus seeks out relationship with her. In the kin-dom of God, relationships matter, relationships are the priority. The relationships between God and human beings matter, but so do our relationships with one another. This story teaches us that it is through relationships that real healing occurs. Randy Taran, founder of *Project Happiness*, an organization she started in an effort to help her own children understand and deal with bullying, depression, and stress, posts daily words of encouragement on social media.

This week I remembered one I had seen quite a while ago. It goes like this, "When 'I' is replaced with 'We' even illness becomes wellness." Throughout the Gospel of Mark, we see Jesus paying attention to the ones who have been on the margins, excluded from community, we see him drawing the circle wide, making a place for

everyone. The kin-dom of God will not be contained by the boundaries we set. The kin-dom of God is for everyone.

I don't want to leave this text without addressing what I think is an important point to make any time we look at a healing story. When we look at these stories through the lens of our own experiences, we cannot help but notice that not everyone in our lives who has a terminal or chronic illness is healed. The people we love die. Some of those people were our role models when it comes to following the ways of Jesus. They had incredible faith. If God *can* heal, why didn't God heal them? We know people, maybe some in this room right now who are suffering from chronic illness that makes doing the things they love painful or even impossible. Why doesn't God heal them? Doesn't this story teach us that God has the power to heal? And if it does, how are we supposed to feel about the times when God doesn't cure the cancer or keep our loved ones from dying in spite of our prayers, in spite of our faith?

I heard a story once of a man who had been diagnosed with a terminal illness while he was still in his 50's. He and his wife prayed for healing. Twenty years later, while he was in the last stages of the debilitating disease, a family member asked him about his faith and what he felt about his God who clearly did not answer his prayers for healing. He said, "I have been healed, not of this horrible disease, that's biology, but I have been healed of my fear of this disease. The disease did not win."

The way that I understand prayer is that it is not like climbing up on Santa's lap with our Christmas lists and then hoping for the best on Christmas morning. There's so much more to it than that. Having the confidence to share something of our ourselves with God, to ask something of God, is to edge into deeper relationship with God. Things may not happen as we hope, but the process of coming to God over and over again, changes us, it changes our minds and our hearts. When we pray, we are in community with God and with one another. We are not alone. I becomes **We**. In the kin-dom of God, WE are a priority.

These stories remind us that we have the power to choose what is important and if we are interested in choosing based on what Jesus taught and how he lived, then we should choose to be on the side of the ones who are most vulnerable. We must choose WE over I, community over isolation. Our job is to make room for everyone. And when we do, there is healing because we are not alone. You

belong here. There is room for you. May the gift of community and love for one another create space for healing for us and for our neighbors. Amen.