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St. John's Tappahannock

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Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Today's gospel stories entail people who were rejected by many, yet Jesus sat with them, ate with them, and in so doing, pulled them back into acceptance and belonging. Let's look at what is said in our weekly Sunday bulletin for newcomers, and is always good for us regulars to revisit: *"Welcome to St. John's Episcopal Church. We pray that you experience God's presence in this community of faith, a community where we strive to be loving and joyous, inclusive, **transforming**, and filled with God's grace."*

Key word in my opinion, "Transforming."

Let's look at what was wrong about these people. First, tax collectors worked for the Roman empire, which oppressed the majority of the population. Unless you were a soldier or born into the ruling class, or a tax collector, life was pretty rough. So just being a tax collector was off-putting. In addition, they were always suspected for skimming off the top. What about the hemorrhaging woman? We will say more about her in a moment, but bleeding women were to be in isolation during their menses, and a chronically bleeding woman was really on her own. And what about Jesus himself, who was willing to touch a corpse (since the people thought the synagogue leader's daughter was dead)? Both would be considered ritually unclean if entering the temple for prayers.

By Jesus entering into the lives of the outcast, through a relationship he established which in one way or the other included their eyes being opened to their own sinfulness (in the case of the tax collector), repentance, and transformation, they were back into regular society *because they were changed*.

Let's remember too, that yes, of course, Jesus loves the righteous, and counts on all good people who are the salt of the earth to keep the nations over the centuries from flying apart into total chaos because they are righteous and influential. When Jesus says that he came to for those who are sick, not for those who are well, this does not *prioritize* the sinful as in 'loving them more'. This is about healing those who are separated from God, from others, and from

themselves because of their condition, which is destabilizing for community, and bringing them back into beloved community, restored, able to contribute.

Jesus was a healer. So it is inferred that we too are called to be healers, to be forgiving and to remember that all are welcome into the beloved community. That is what Jesus meant by, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For Matthew, a former tax collector, to be invited into the team of 12 disciples, is an example of Jesus' abundant mercy. Just like the apostle Paul, who within a short time they were both able to prove themselves. Nobody thought anymore about their former occupations of rooting out of Christians for persecution, and being a corrupt collaborator with Roman imperialism. Our God is a God of second chances. And we are to the people of second (and maybe 3rd, 4th and 5th chances) as well.

So let's look at the young girl and the bleeding woman. The gospel of Mark gives us a lot more to work with in this same event, so I am going to pull from that interpretation of this gospel story as well.

These are two stories of the feminine experience in the Bible times, nested together like Ukrainian nesting dolls, two phases of many, of the woman's journey. One is a young maiden, and one is a woman in her middle years; one is surrounded by family, one is alone in the world. Both represent the experiences of many unseen individuals in similar circumstances. What is Jesus teaching us as he shows tender mercy to them both, and to others involved in the story? Let's look at the details as we move towards an answer.

The un-named woman had suffered from bleeding for 12 years. Had she gone to the temple of Jerusalem for healing prayers, like the lepers, she would have been declared ritually unclean, (according to Leviticus 12:1-8; 15:19-30).

We are also told that because of her hemorrhaging, and her efforts to find a cure, she had been reduced to poverty.

In addition, in ancient Israel, those who were suffering chronically like this would have been viewed as enduring a punishment by God for sin. The ongoing hemorrhage would have left her increasingly cut off from community.

There is no doubt that this woman came to be defined by her sickness, except for in the eyes of Jesus.

Her status would have been in relation to a man, but there was no man. Just as Jairus goes to Jesus on behalf of his daughter, she would have normally been presented in the story by a brother, or son or uncle, if unmarried.

So the woman who is presented without family had to push through the crowds, knowing that there was a chance Jesus too would have been rejected, because it was also Levitical law that anyone she touched would be declared ritually unclean as well.

Her level of desperation must have been at a highpoint, that she would have taken such a risk of shaming the Holy One, who she knew could heal her – but *apparently* the reward of her risk-taking was that her faith made her well

After so many people had cast her down over such a long period of time, Jesus lifted her up. We can just imagine how the crowd must have gasped and anticipated a reprimand when Jesus called out, “Who touched my clothes?”.

And how surprised they were when instead, he looked into her eyes and said the words that made the healing complete:

“Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your disease.”

That word ‘Daughter’ must have filled the deepest wounds of her heart. No longer an outcast, no longer alone in a society that only sees women and treats women in connection to the men in their lives – she knew she was a beloved child of God. And now, so did the crowd.

Then Jesus said, “Go in peace, healed of your disease.” This peace is health, well-being, and wholeness – her body healed – but Jesus was interested in her mind and soul as well – a complete healing and setting free from the prison of both the physical suffering and its associated social shunning.

Sickness had defined her and isolated her, but now she was free to go to God’s temple. Jesus did not just heal people from disease, but restored people to community.

She wanted and needed the bleeding to stop, but what she really needed and Jesus knew it, was to be accepted once again.

This story is told with the story of Jairus daughter to reveal that Jesus' intention was to overturn what we call clean and unclean, and to overcome death with new life. But in the end, this day, with these three events, (the tax collector, the daughter and the bleeding woman), Jesus is revealed as breaker of barriers. In fact they were all given new life in Christ.

Later today I suggest going to Google images and taking a look at a painting of the 'Raising of Jairus' Daughter' by Gabriel Max, (1878). In it Jesus sits next to the child before she has awoken from death. He is fully in shadow, and she is in a bright white shift surrounded by an abundance of fabric like the cascading folds of an angel's robe. This is a such a powerful juxtaposition because the child who is still in the sleep of death is in radiant glory, and Jesus, who is the Light of Salvation, is in the darkness. This symbolizes how Jesus embraced death so that we would have life.

The story of Jairus daughter, and all the stories of raising from the dead, presage Jesus' Resurrection, which revealed Him to be the Savior and Redeemer of all creation, and brought us out of error into truth, sin into righteousness, death into life. We celebrate this every Sunday at the Eucharist.

When temple leader Jairus implored Jesus' healing presence, so that his daughter could be made well, he used a term that in Greek can be translated as "to save, heal, preserve or rescue." The word, *sozo*, speaks not only to a return to health and thriving, but refers also to the promises of resurrection.

Jesus also breaks barriers within religious life in general that can demean and divide. Jesus shows us that he does not take Levitical law literally, but with wise rabbinical perspective, carefully weighs what is needed in any given situation. So what is Jesus teaching in these events events? He is modeling the radical unconditional love of God whose second commandment is to love our neighbor.

The faith of the hemorrhaging Daughter is presented as sort of a border-crossing courage, daring and persistent. The very act of reaching out to God in such a brazen way, out of the depths, is a power each of us human beings have. *How interesting that Jesus focuses not on his power to heal, but our power as people of*

faith to reach out to Him in all situations to restore, renew, rebuild and return to fullness of life.

Healing comes in many forms, physical, emotional, social, and otherwise, and we can trust that our most faithful and courageous efforts to reach out to our Lord will be met with God's mercy.

It is Jairus whose faith is to be commended in the expectation that Jesus can raise his daughter. And in the gospel story right after he and everyone present marvel at the healing of the hemorrhaging woman, he receives the news that his daughter is dead. But Jesus kindly says to Jairus, "Do not fear, only believe."

And with these words of assurance from Jesus, Jairus does not lose hope.

How important are words of assurance. The words we say to each other are the threads of the tapestry of an exquisitely healthy spiritual community. And so are we to speak to ourselves.

Once at a staff meeting at my former parish, we were talking about parenting concerns. Even when your kids are post college, their various circumstances can make us fear the worst at times. One staff member gave us all good advice. She said, "How about if instead of imagining the worst case scenario, we say to ourselves, 'What if things go remarkably well!?!' I have been trying that lately, and it actually seems to help the best scenario unfold!" I think that is part of Jesus message to us today too.

For as well as modeling radical and unconditional compassion for others, Jesus is showing us how to use a combination of joy and imagination, instead of fear and imagination, even when it seems everyone around you is focused on the fear.

So let us go forth today, encouraged and empowered, and anxious to be a source of reassurance to others and even to ourselves.

And together we can respond with Psalm 30:12-13 -

12 You have turned my wailing into dancing; *
you have put off my sack-cloth and clothed me with joy.

13 Therefore my heart sings to you without ceasing; *
O LORD my God, I will give you thanks for ever.

Amen



'Raising of Jairus' Daughter' by Gabriel Max, (1878)

