

UNDERCOVER MIRACLES

Mark 5:21-43

Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

Sunday, June 28, 2015

Today's reading from Mark's Gospel tells a story within a story. Both are about two entirely different people coming to Jesus in desperation. First there is Jarius, a father whose daughter is dying and then there is an unnamed woman with a chronic incurable illness. Jarius is a prominent man, the president of the local synagogue. On the other hand the woman, because of her bleeding, was an outcast. According to the Law of Moses she was unclean, therefore condemned to live in isolation outside the community. Her neighbors avoided her, not just for religious reasons but also because they feared she was contagious. Ironically it's probable Jarius had something to do with branding her unclean since he was the town's religious leader.

Despite being polar opposites on the social scale these two people were in the same boat. Both depended on doctors, and in both cases no more could be done.

Then Jesus showed up preceded by his reputation for being a healer as well as a thorn in the side of the religious establishment. Already Jesus endured multiple confrontations with rabbis and Pharisees who were scandalized by Jesus' refusal to stop healing the sick on the Sabbath. Keep in mind today's reading is not an isolated incident, rather it's the continuation of the greater narrative. Last Sunday's Gospel lesson told about Jesus calming the storm on the lake and afterward rebuking his disciples for their fear and lack of faith. Even so, they stuck with Jesus and followed him to the next stop. There they saw Jarius, one of "them," a member of the religious establishment, fall on his knees and beg Jesus to save his daughter. Would Jarius humble himself before Jesus if his daughter was in the pink? Or would Jarius be one of those who baited Jesus for breaking the Sabbath law? Truth is, we'll never know. Either way, one thing is certain, Jarius didn't care if he himself was ostracized for begging for his daughter's life.

Jesus realized the risk Jarius was taking. Hearing Jarius say, "My little daughter is very sick. Please come and place your hands on her so that she will get well and live!" Jesus immediately agreed to go with him.

Now we come to the story within the story. Wanting to see what would happen next the town's people followed Jesus to Jarius' house but before getting very far Jesus found himself being engulfed by the crowd now pressing in on him. With so much confusion the woman who suffered from severe bleeding saw her chance. Probably covering her head so she wouldn't be recognized she elbowed her way through the crowd up to Jesus and touched the

hem of his cloak. Immediately her bleeding stopped and she was healed. But before she could sneak away and disappear she heard Jesus say, “Who touched by clothes?”

Everybody became silent until someone finally blurted out, “What do you mean, ‘Who touched me?’ The people are pressed in on you.”

Mark reports Jesus stopped and looked around but Luke adds that Jesus then said, “Someone touched me for I knew it when power went out from me.”

The woman then came forward and knelt before him. She thought Jesus would rebuke her for sneaking up and stealing his power from him. Instead Jesus said, “My daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your trouble.”

Seeing the woman’s health restored Jarius’ heart must have leapt. If Jesus can heal her, my daughter will live!” But his hopes were dashed when messengers arrived to deliver the bad news, “Your daughter is dead.”

“Don’t be afraid Jarius, only believe.” Jesus declared. Most likely in shock Jarius followed Jesus back to his house. There he was advised by his friends, “Your daughter is dead, why bother the Master?”

Jesus ignored the naysayers and declared, “The child is not dead—she is only sleeping.”

Jarius’ friends then started laughing (most probably they were the religious types who opposed Jesus and wanted to embarrass him). Jesus then put them all out and took Jarius, his wife and Peter, James and John into the child’s room.

Minutes later the girl was up and around. Everyone, including the naysayers, was astounded.

Now, what are we to take from these stories? There’s the temptation to focus only on the healing miracles, the girl’s resuscitation and the woman’s healing.

A theological case can be made that miraculous healings only happen when God wants to grab our attention so we can learn something important and life affirming. In other words, the woman’s and the daughter’s healing was a means to an even greater end. Yes, Jesus is all about physical wholeness and new life but Jesus is primarily all about restoring our humanity. And humanity is restored when we love and respect one another, including those on the opposite ends of the social spectrum from us.

Now, let’s do some detective work. Question: Who was Mark’s original audience, who was he trying to reach? Answer: Jews who accepted Christ. Next question: Why did Mark include this story? Did he want to leave his readers believing if they really believed their diseases would go away and their life spans prolonged?

Being Jews they knew firsthand the realities of hard living and oppressive Roman rule. They expected life spans to be short and child mortality rates to be high. If there was ever a people hardened by reality it would be the Jews. And if there was ever a people conditioned not to expect pennies from heaven, it would be the Jews.

So the Jews of Mark's community were not about to interpret these miracle stories as guarantees that God will always come in the nick of time to fix things. They were too wise for that.

Instead, being students of their long, sad history which included years of slavery, wanderings in the wilderness and a devastating exile, these Jews who embraced Christ already knew that miracles happen for a reason. The obvious reason is to restore health and restart life, but if you read between the lines these healings had the potential to go farther than that. Yes, the woman was cured and Jarius got his daughter back, but something else could have happened. The woman, once an outcast because of religious regulations, would be restored to the community and Jarius, a prominent religious leader in that community who enforced those same religious regulations could have had a born again experience and his opposition to Jesus would have died when his daughter lived.

Of course, this is just speculation on my part. We don't know what effect these miracles had on that woman or Jarius in a spiritual sense. Mark says nothing. Luke only tells us both Jarius and his wife were astounded and Matthew reported that word of these two miracles spread throughout the region. But what was everybody talking about, only the physical miracles or were people also aware of any miraculous transformations in the life of that village? In other words did these miracles lead to a new birth of faith that brought about healing and reconciliations between people and with God?

That is the primary reason for miracles so we can become aware of God's saving activity in the world. It's God's way of surprising us into the Kingdom when people's attitudes and behaviors are transformed for good. That's when God's Kingdom comes and God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Ultimately physical healings bring about spiritual healings. But keep in mind physical healings are temporary. Spiritual healings are forever.

Some of you have experienced physical healings even though the prognosis was grim and as news of your healing spread, friends and neighbors were astounded. Because of your healing the Kingdom came near to them too. But is being astounded enough to lead to new life for them too? You see, the way we respond to God's miracles determines the quality of our life together in the world.

Speaking of miracles, our four New Beginnings House Groups have met for the last time and last Tuesday the House Leaders, Cathy Lawson, Chris Sartor, Emily Meoli, Jenn Pearson, Monica Addison-Walker and Liz Stafford met with me to report each groups' assessments of

our strengths, our weaknesses and our future ministry. Each group, whose members make up half of our worshipping congregation believes Babcock Church definitely has a future and all of the group members numbering half of our worshipping congregation are committed to participating in that future. What's more everyone agrees God is calling us to become what I've been encouraging us to become, a truly missional church that reaches out. They believe time has come to put real flesh and bones on our Mission Statement "Bringing Christ to People."

The miracle I see in all this is that people are now ready. Over the past ten years the other programs we went through including Deep Shift, have brought us closer to this new time and place. There has been a notable shift in our members' perception about what it means to be a church that doesn't exist just for us but a missionary outpost for others.

What will that look like? We don't know yet and we are not going to jump the gun and experiment with ill advised programs that may or may not work. Instead we will intentionally take it slow and prayerfully prepare ourselves for our own Pentecost experience. And that means we all get on our knees.

Years ago we had in place a strong small groups ministry. The clarion call was "Spiritual Formation Lays the Foundation." We were intentional in coming together to grow together in Christ. It is the consensus of our House Leaders that it's time to resurrect this ministry so we can come together to pray, meditate and wait for God to speak to and invite each one of us to become part of a growing servant congregation.

This will not happen overnight. We will not rush ahead of God. We will take our time and wait upon the Lord.

Soon after D Day when the Americans and British successfully invaded Normandy Churchill told the House of Commons,
"This is not the end nor is it the beginning of the end but it is the end of the beginning."

All indications are that those of you who participated in the New Beginnings House Groups believe we are at the end of the beginning of the old way of being the Church. The New Beginning will come in God's time, if we let it.

You'll be hearing more about this in the near future. In the meantime be open to miracles, seeing visions and dreaming dreams, visions and dreams of our new beginnings as a future church committed to service in the name of Christ and for his Gospel