

“The Nature of Jesus’ Ministry and Ours”

Mark 5:21–43

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Another church I served decided to discontinue a senior adult visitor role before I began work. This may have seemed bad for me, given how difficult it is to find the time older members deserve while covering every other base of ministry, but visitation roles are not always an unmixed blessing. In this case, the senior adult minister had a habit of undercutting the pastor when he visited, and the frequency with which he visited people depended on the gifts they gave him. His role was compensated, but people who did extra things for him were visited more.

Of course, eliminating the role did not remove him from the equation. Someone who had known him in another church said hiring him was a lot like stepping on chewing gum. Once you hired him, you were stuck with him. He was the minister who—when asked to have a prayer at a funeral when he thought he should have been asked to share a eulogy—addressed God, and then fifteen minutes later, said, “Amen.” In between the opening and closing, he delivered his eulogy.

This man did many irritating things, but caring for people based on what they did for him financially bothered me the most. There are ministers who function this way, in addition to congregants who find nothing wrong with catering to those who have more, but it is not the way to proceed for anyone who seeks to follow Jesus.

Jesus ministers to everyone in need without any consideration of who they are or what they can do for him. Having a need is all that is required. On one occasion, he seems to consider a person’s standing. When a Syrophenician woman asks him to cast a demon out of her daughter, he questions her worthiness, using an ugly metaphor for Gentiles. But this story is an outlier, and in the end, he helps her.

The far more common pattern is found in our reading from Mark wherein Jesus heals two people without hesitation. Both could be easily

dismissed. They are female which in and of itself makes them of lesser importance, but Jairus' daughter is thought to be dead when Jesus gets to her. So, not only is there nothing Jesus can do; he should not touch her body because it is ritually unclean. The woman who has been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years presents her own challenges.

It is not necessarily the case that her bleeding is related to menstrual cycles, but it could be which would make her completely off-limits for a rabbi like Jesus because, well, men set the rules in this time, like many, and they can barely stand to think about anything distinctively female... But even if the bleeding has another source, she is ritually unclean. Sickness is thought to be the result of sin, and ongoing sickness like this is surely a sign that she is a bad sinner!

The fact that she sneaks up behind Jesus indicates that she is aware of her place. But Mark says she has heard about Jesus—we don't know what—surely something about his compassion and ability to heal. A simple word about what Jesus has done for us can bear fruit in ways we might never imagine. But whatever the woman has heard, it motivates her to seek Jesus out, even if this means running the risk of ridicule.

Of course, she is not ridiculed. When she touches Jesus, she is healed, and he senses that power has gone out from him. So, he asks who has touched his clothes. And she comes forward in fear and trembling, bowing before Jesus, expecting the worst. But Jesus surprises her and everyone else by saying, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease." Jesus ministers to her because she is a person in need, just as he ministers to Jairus' daughter.

But there is another detail in this story which could have led to differentiated care. Most faithful people in this time would view a synagogue leader's daughter as being more important than some unnamed woman who is bleeding, and broke, due to the healthcare system of her time. But Jesus isn't most people. He doesn't rank people in terms of significance. We are all children of God, worthy of love.

The implication for us is clear. Those who claim to follow Jesus make no distinction between people in need. There is no hierarchy of concern, only children of God who need help. I am deeply grateful that this is a church that understands this part of our calling. For example, within the church, some

people are inevitably more involved and connected. So, the funeral for one of these people will be large, unless he/she has outlived all peers, like Gerri Harris almost making it to 108! But what the church offers in ministry — a meal or reception, greeters, visitors, and the service — is the same no matter who the person is, how involved they are, how much they give to the church.

Outside the church, ministry has a focus, a way to prioritize needs. But our focus is on the needs, not who has them, whether they look like us or not, whether they are from this country or not, whether they have tried everything we would have or not. The only qualification is being a child of God in need. I am deeply grateful that this is how our church does things. Whether in our clothing ministry or food truck, our work on Habitat Houses or youth mission trips, our partnership work in Honduras or Ukraine, people from diverse backgrounds are served. The only qualification is being in need.

Jesus ministers to all people in need, regardless of who they are and what their place is, and this point is underscored by one reality we might easily miss — touch. Physical touch is a part of healing for Jesus, and often he touches people others find offensive — Gentiles, women, lepers, the blind, the lame, people possessed by demons.

In our story, he takes Jairus' daughter by the hand, a child thought to be dead, and says, "*Talitha cum,*" which means, "Little girl, get up!" and she does. The woman suffering from hemorrhages touches Jesus, but touch is still involved, and Jesus does not reprimand her for touching him. Touch is a central part of healing, and it is a sign of our willingness to cross boundaries, help people others consider untouchable, make ourselves vulnerable to whatever contagion another person may have or be perceived to have — physical, social, or moral.

I picked up one of these a week ago, a lovely case of COVID that Dana got as well. I may have been exposed to it at the CBF meeting, but I don't know for sure. I only know that Dana got it from me and didn't seem particularly grateful for the gift...

A part of me is hesitant to attend larger meetings, especially in the near future, but we cannot live without exposing ourselves to various things, much less minister to others. Father Damien exposed himself to the leprosy that

plagued his flock on Molokai, so much that one day he began a message, saying, “*We* lepers...” He had contracted the disease.

But it’s not just physical contagions we confront in seeking to care for people in need. Some years ago, ministering to AIDS patients carried all sorts of stigma in addition to a great deal of misplaced medical fear. Thankfully, most of that is gone now, but not all of it. And there are other people and places many good churchgoing folk wouldn’t be caught dead near, but where would Jesus be and with whom would he spend time? We don’t have to guess. Scripture gives us the answer.

Who we are willing to touch speaks volumes about to whom we are willing to extend the love of Christ, though we need to add a footnote here. Sometimes the most caring act is to refrain from touching. It takes sensitivity, and even with this factored in, we may not always get it right, but some people have had experiences with inappropriate touching, and thus do not want to be touched, especially by people they don’t know that well. We need to honor the boundaries people establish.

I have known ministers who struggled to get this. They wanted to extend kindness through touch, but kindness for some people is not being touched. Some people just can’t seem to get this. Dana’s mother called one such minister “kissy face” because he was too intimate too quickly. Ministry in the name of Jesus takes effort and care.

Those who claim to follow Jesus make no distinction between people in need, and they are willing to touch, or not touch, those who need care. But there is one other thing we need to note in this story. Two women are healed. No one is not healed. So, we may get the impression that Jesus heals everyone, or everyone who has faith, like the people in the story. It is something we hear often — if only we have faith and pray the right way, God will provide what we need. Well, that isn’t always so. God does the most God can do in the context of the realities of this world, but this doesn’t mean we always get what we want. Jesus didn’t. He prayed for another way but still ended up on a cross.

For the most part, scripture is more like an American crime show than a British one. In the American shows, the good guys/gals almost always win while the bad guys/gals are caught. Not so in British shows, nor in real life.

The Bible tells us who God is and what Jesus is like — loving, compassionate, powerful, invested in healing. But not every illness and woe is healed. The Holocaust alone dismisses this notion. And some of the best people we know suffer and die.

God does provide something for our situation. Presbyterian minister Michael L. Lindvall tells a story about a friend who was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease when he was still in his fifties (*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 3, pp. 188-190). He was a man of deep faith. He and his wife prayed that he might be healed, but twenty years later he was in the last debilitating stages of the disease. Nevertheless, he told Lindvall his prayers had been answered. "I have been healed," he said, "not of Parkinson's disease, but I've been healed of my fear of Parkinson's disease."

God does the most God can do, but it's not always a cure, and it doesn't depend on us. I'll never forget a comment former Baptist Joint Committee Director James Dunn made when he was in the hospital. He had an aortal tear and was intubated for some time. It looked like he might not survive, but this was James Dunn, a Rottweiler in a Chihuahua's body, as someone said! After he awakened, a friend called and said, "Doesn't it make you believe in the power of prayer?" James replied, "No, but it does make me believe in the goodness of God."

James felt badly about the sharpness of his reply, but I agreed with his theology. Prayer makes a difference, but God's goodness doesn't depend on us. And some prayer language can persuade people to believe that a loved one didn't get well because they didn't pray properly for them. Nonsense! God is good, and we are always enriched by God's love. Sometimes a loved one gets well, sometimes we find the strength to go on, but always God does the most God can do, and in the end, this life is not all there is. The final chapter is yet to be written.

With any story of healing, it is important to remember this, and it is important to remember to whom we are called to extend love and how. We follow a savior who is not very discriminating with his love, one who is pretty radical, in fact. But then, that's why are included in it.