

## A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 5:21-43

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

The impact of this story is directly related to the change in psychological distance between the listeners and a woman with a flow of blood, and between Jairus, his daughter, and Jesus. The story begins with Jairus, an elder in the synagogue, coming and falling at Jesus' feet, and begging him to come and heal his daughter who is on the point of death. It is probably not possible to overdue the emotional intensity of his anxiety and his pleading with Jesus.

The scene is then set for a woman who touches Jesus in the midst of a large crowd surrounding and pressing in on him. The woman and the description of her situation is highly intimate. This is all an inside view so you, as a storyteller, are describing her experience. She could not, for example, sit on a chair in a house, because anyone who sat on that chair would be unclean. She couldn't cook. She had virtually been ostracized from the whole of society because of her condition. The telling is very quiet and very intense and shows the degree of her desperation for help, but also her confidence in Jesus. Even the healing—"After touching his garment she knew in her body that she had been healed"—is very quiet and intimate. You want to convey a tone of intimacy and interior participation in her experience.

Later when the woman falls at Jesus' feet, the same dynamic is present, but now what was private is made public. The woman anticipates that Jesus will condemn her. She has broken the law and by touching him has made him unclean because of her uncleanness. That's why she only touches the hem of his garment. Even though it is a minimal touch, according to the law it doesn't matter. She has made him unclean and he could be rightly angry with her and condemn her for what she has done. Instead he blesses her. He apparently doesn't care about whether she made him unclean. He doesn't seem to pay much attention to those things. What he is concerned about is her well being. He even addresses her as his "daughter."

The woman assumes that she is going to be further ostracized. But Jesus restores her to full social integrity and acceptability in the community. When he says, "Your faith has made you well, go in peace," he is establishing peace in her life. His final injunction is, "Be healed permanently of your affliction." For some reason, the word "permanently" is not translated in the NRSV; but it is present in the Greek. The implication of Jesus' prayer for her—his blessing—is that she be healed permanently from this affliction.

The story of the healing of Jairus' daughter is also a story of radical inclusion, but of a different character. Jairus, as the leader of the synagogue, has full permission to ask Jesus for his help. However, clearly people assume that because the girl is already dead, he doesn't need Jesus. They even make fun of Jesus when he says that she isn't dead, only sleeping. Jesus' injunction to Jairus when they come back and say to him, "Your daughter

is dead. Why trouble the teacher?" is, "Don't be afraid, only believe." The contrast here is between fear and belief. When Jesus comes and they are mourning, you can't overdo the scene. The grieving in Middle Eastern culture over a child who has died is a crescendo—weeping and wailing. It's a huge commotion.

Jesus' injunction to "not be afraid but only believe" is followed by his statement to those who are grieving that she isn't dead, but only sleeping. And they laugh at him. He becomes the subject of mockery. When Jesus goes in to where the child is lying, he takes with him the parents and the three disciples who were with him, so there were six of them who went into the room. Jesus is quiet and goes over and takes the girl by the hand. All of this should be spoken very softly.

Jesus says, "'Talitha cum' which means 'Little girl, get up.'" And she got up and started walking around. Notice that the first response to Jesus' words is that the little girl got up and she started walking. Then the storyteller has to explain to the listeners who are now wondering how this child can walk if she is such a little girl. The storyteller explains, "She was twelve years old." The next response is that the onlookers are amazed. Jesus tells them to be quiet and tell no one—another instance of Jesus' effort to keep his messianic identity secret. The conclusion of the story is his suggestion that they give her something to eat. It's a delightful note at the end of the story about Jesus' finely tuned awareness of the needs of others.