

A Reach, a Touch, and the Thing Between Them

Our Daughter's Reach

We had moved here in 1997 for my taking a faculty position at Cal Poly. The move from our isolated park-like peninsula on upper Chesapeake Bay to the west coast meant I would have direct access to some of the most important emerging American architecture.

Early in our residency here we went on a day trip to Venice Beach, the home of some of the early eclectic work of Frank Gehry and others. He used the industrial vernacular of corrugated steel and rethinking of wood framing in the Spiller House and the metaphors and memories of a former lifeguard tower in a new beachfront house for William and Lynn Norton.

Our walk along the Venice promenade that day is well known in our shared family history.

The summer day was hot, the crowd was huge and pressing. We encountered the narrowing stretch where small stores and stalls are on the land side and the sidewalk vendors line the beach side.

Wave upon wave of a new popular culture of skin and leisure, piercings, tattoos, scooters, roller blades, skateboards, and weightlifters was matched by the wares of the vendors in art, craft, music and food. The aromas of the food, the colors and fabrics, the marijuana, and sweat were overwhelming.

As we grouped more tightly together within crowd we came upon an artist with a disability- he had no legs below the knee and was on a small, wheeled platform only inches above the ground a set of wooden mallets in his hands for mobility allowed him to position himself as he whirled in circles removing his works of outsider art from a small grassy knoll to be seen by viewers more closely, his long Rastafarian locks swinging with each move as if in a dance.

I admired his work and dexterity
What my wife Ann remembers
is our then eight-year-old daughter reaching and gripping Ann's arm.

In that crush and whirlwind of our new world,
it was an appeal for assurance and hope.

Twenty-seven years later we are proud of her career as a psychiatric social worker and case manager with Veterans, ones the dominant culture has marginalized and cast aside.

Reading Mark 5

We heard again this morning from the Gospel of Mark.
This pairing of miracles is in all three of the synoptic Gospels,
but the usually cogent Mark gives us the most detailed rendition.

In the vernacular we might call this passage a two-fer,
or a flight of exquisite stories purposely paired with one another.
Like the parables, that means a third meaning is implied between the stories.

In the chapters before, Jesus has
cast out demons,
laid out the parables of the mustard seed,
and calmed the storms of the sea of Galilee that terrified the disciples.
He had been gathering such large crowds that he left locations by boat.

And even before he lands again, the crowds start to gather.
In our social media age we forget how the word-of-mouth travels fast

Jairus' Appeal

First comes Jairus and when in Scripture we have a name, it may give us a hint to pay attention;
the etymology of Jairus means "to give light".

As a leader of the synagogue approaching Jesus,
it suggests Jesus is making his name felt in the Jewish faith into which he was born.
Jairus, in proper respectful form, falls before Jesus,
and begs him for a laying on of hands for his daughter's healing, as she is near death.
Jesus moves with him toward his house.

The Woman's Reach

But before he gets there,
through the crowd a woman approaches who had also heard about Jesus.
Unlike respectful Jairus she is marginalized and has become defined by her condition-
twelve years of a hemorrhage.
We aren't told any more detail on that affliction,
but we are told she has spent all her money on doctors-
perhaps well-meaning ones, but they have not helped
and may have actually made her condition worse.
By Old Testament Levitic law, she is permanently unclean.

She is desperate.

She makes her way from behind Jesus, through the crowd and reaches,
touching her hand on the hem of his cloak.
Upon that touch, she felt in her body she was healed of that disease.

Mark gives us a fascinating insight to the fully man/fully God nature of Jesus
Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him,
Jesus stops and looks across the crowd and says
"who touched my clothes?".

The disciples, like the so called straight man in a comedy duo, immediately say- how are we to know?- look at the crowd!
The woman approaches again this time in fear and trembling,
This time in front of Jesus,
perhaps expecting an admonishment.
She also falls before him and making no excuses, we are simply told “she tells the truth”.

Jesus, does not condemn her, but instead tenderly calls her “**daughter**”
and tells her “**go in peace**”.
She is not only healed, she is made whole by his acknowledgement.

Jairus’ Daughter

Word reaches the crowd that Jairus’ daughter has died.
Some in the crowd say not to trouble the teacher anymore.
But they have no idea what is to come....

Given that news, Jesus again speaks to heartbroken Jairus,
in what we could make our short catechism:
“**do not fear, only believe**”.

What is revealed next is only for the family and a handful of disciples.
He leaves the crowd behind.

At the house people are weeping and wailing.
Some commentators suggest that in that era those of wealth
paid professional mourners would come and weep and wail,
and I take that to heart,
because when Jesus says “the child is only sleeping”
they laughed at him. “What could he do?”
But they have no idea what is to come....

He puts *them* all outside
and with only the child’s father and mother and 3 disciples goes into where the child is.
Taking the dead girl’s hand, another Levitic form of uncleanness,
with this touch he says “talitha cum”, usually translated as “Little girl, get up”.
But some trace the translation to be even more precious.
“**Little lamb, get up.**”

And she does, walking around the room.
Jesus tells them, while they gaze in amazement,
“Get her something to eat”.
I think that is the Jewish mother component of Jesus’ nature.

The Thing Between

There are many ways to see the third idea between these stories-
Jesus as coming for Jew and Gentile alike? Yes.
Women raised in equality with men as people? Yes.
The leveling of grace for wealthy and the poor? Yes.
A preview of Jesus’ own resurrection? Yes.

Jesus conducting miracles as legitimacy of his status?

He only reveals the girl's resurrection to a small select group and asks they keep it a secret.

It seems to me that between the stories are things we can learn about lamentation and hope.

Unlike the professional weepers brought into Jairus' home, lamentations like David's in Second Samuel for Saul and Jonathan are the recognition of situation beyond one's own ability to cope.

Weeping cleanses the eye to see clearly.

St. Ephram the Syrian says

"Through your tears and God's goodness, the soul which has been dead will be restored".

What is helpful to me especially are the concepts of embodiment woven into the story, The physicality of bodies, positions with each other and in locations, the sense of touch and feeling, and the spoken words chosen for relation.

Embodiment allows us to feel presence-

God among us,

and our appealing to the spirit for hope beyond our expectations in this time.

Being given the name of Jairus, yet not his daughter,

suggests we give him particular attention to his actions-

about his bodily approach- frontal to Jesus, formal, respectful, on behalf of a beloved.

I think this a metaphor for the embodiment of our church- we feel the realities within our community and through the gifts of the spirit we are given grace and agency to act in hope.

Those telling Jesus the girl has died- "why waste the teacher's time"

or those laughing on his arrival at her death with his talk of life,

to me suggest a culture that says the faith community is wasting it's time,

as if it is too late to affect outcome: the situation is hopeless to them.

This stands in contrast to an understanding that lament and hope are bound within the process of being a Christian.

Richard Rohr says:

"The human instinct is to block suffering and pain. This is especially true in the West, where we have been influenced by 'rationalism'...

As anyone who has experienced grief can attest, it isn't rational.

We simply don't know what to do with our pain....

The great wisdom traditions are trying to teach us that grief isn't something from which to run.

It's a liminal space, a time of transformation."

Think of embodiment in the approach of the bleeding woman.

One can imagine her exertion pushing through the crowd,

metaphorically pushing aside all else in her life for an appeal.

Her lament is captured in the reach for the hem, from behind, just before he passed on.

I have found myself there,
and I know from the laments shared in this house, many of you have as well.
That reach is grasping for a different reality.
Be with me.
Heal me.

And that opportunity is to be extended to everyone
as we are challenged in second Corinthians to “excel in this generous undertaking.”

That sense of touch, literal and metaphorical, speaks to a certain intimacy of presence.
That morning at Venice Beach, when confronted with unexpected ramping up anxiety,
our daughter trusted our presence within the crowd.
Her hand in Ann's was the connection she needed.
Jairus' daughter is held by the hand and called “little lamb”,
Jesus speaks to the woman as “daughter”
That is how close the spirit is.

Prayer is not a conjuring
It is a tearing away of what we accumulate that gets in the way
of our being in the presence of God-always

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann passed on earlier this month.
As a German soldier he survived the firebombing of Hamburg that killed 40,000 people.
In his reflecting on the horrors of the war of his day,
the saturation of death of that era, and his survival as a prisoner,
when asked “where was God in this?”, he answered:
“God had chosen to be there, suffering alongside the oppressed.”

“Daughter”, “lamb”, “give her something to eat”
are spoken within an intimate embodied community
bound together by love,
not bounded by cleanliness laws.
Being with the spirit alongside, and each other,
together in the now and what will come,
in hope.

Amen