

“The Tale of Two Daughters”  
Mark 5:21-43

Roula: Today we have two stories of healing (*Don interrupts...*)

Don: Pastor Roula, I have this great sign that we need to put up in the church to help to get people to support the health care reform. I got this today from AARP, in case you don't know who they are, it is the American Association of Retired Persons.

Roula: Wait a second! I don't think you can just put up any sign, especially when it comes to this issue.

Don: What do you mean? I think everyone should think the way I do because I am always right!

Roula: Not necessarily! Even though you are always right, there are different opinions in this church on every issue. We have to discuss such issues thoroughly and be very respectful of the different opinions that exist.

Don: This is an urgent issue. We have 47 million people without health insurance. Also, about 60% of the bankruptcies that people end up with are because of their medical bills which they can't pay. I also heard that if we don't fix this system older people like myself may not have medical coverage when we retire.

Roula: I know, I know! Yet, this issue is not that simple. How are we going to pay for this? This is going to cost billions of dollars. Our national deficit is so big.

Don: But I really think this is a good thing to support. Can't we just do it just this one time?

Roula: Wow! You are really persistent! I am afraid you just have to wait on this one!

Don: I guess, I will go hang this up in my office! But may be you should ask, what would Jesus do?

Indeed the health care reform debate is a hot button issue in our country at this present time. People on both sides of the issue are very passionate about it and the stakes are high: 47 million people in our country are uninsured and the cost for reforming our system is in the billions of dollars. It is hard for the people who are in the middle on this issue to find a way out. Who deserves to be covered and who does not? Who is to be included and based on what standards? If our system is going to be changed to cover all people, who is going to pay the bill?

Well, today I don't claim to have the answer to these questions because I don't believe there is one perfect answer. But I do know that as people of faith we must struggle with such questions as questions of faith and not just as political views based on our political affiliation. Often times, we get stuck being on one side or the other and forget the real issue at hand. Divisive politics puts us in positions that make it hard for us to see a third or a fourth way. What made me think of this issue this week is the story from the Gospel of Mark in chapter five. It is a story of two healings: the healing of the woman with the hemorrhage problem and the healing and raising from the dead of Jairus' daughter.

This passage from Mark 5 is about a sharp contrast between the healing of two different women. One who comes from a privileged wealthy family and the other who comes from a place of humiliation and dishonor in her community. On the one hand we have the daughter of Jairus who grew up in the household of the leader of the synagogue. In the text the man is called “a leader of the synagogue named Jairus”. That is a technical title, high on the honor code of Israel. A “leader of the synagogue” was not a person who was a Pharisee, rabbi or scribe – that is, one who held an ordained or academic position. It was an office of high importance for a willing wealthy lay person. A “leader of the synagogue” was responsible for financially maintaining the building, paying for its upkeep and being the primary contributor to any building expansion or renovation. He was also responsible for the conduct of synagogue worship and the selection of the public readings from the Torah. Thus, the first person with whom Jesus deals with in this story is a very powerful person ecclesiastically, economically, politically and in the eyes of the people.

On the other hand we have the woman with the hemorrhage problem. She is not even named in the story because she was so insignificant. She had no money because she had spent all of her money on trying to get better. Her social status in society was ruined because of her illness. A woman with a flow of blood was considered unclean and was usually unable to be part of society (Lev. 12:1-8; 15:19-30). Therefore, she must be ostracized from society. She was disqualified from marrying and if she were already married when the issue of blood began, she was to be permanently separated from husband and children, and was not allowed to participate in synagogue or temple worship.

The daughter of Jairus was 12 which was the age of a young girl becoming a woman. The hemorrhaging woman had her condition for 12 years which robbed her of her womanhood. In his book, *Binding the Strong Man*, biblical scholar Ched Myers summarizes the depth of the story by writing, “Mark shapes this story to intentionally juxtapose the two extremes of the Jewish social scale. The little girl had enjoyed twelve years of privilege as the daughter of a synagogue ruler, yet was now ‘near death’ (5:23). The woman had suffered twelve years of destitution at the hands of the purity system and its ‘doctors’; yet she still took initiative in her struggle for liberation. The object lesson can only be that if Judaism wishes to ‘be saved and live’ (5:23), it must embrace the ‘faith’ of the kingdom: a new social order with equal status for all. This alone will liberate the lowly outcast and snatch the ‘noble’ from death.”

Jesus offers healing to both the poor woman and the rich girl. Jesus was able to see human worth and faith in both. The love of God is not distributed to only those who are deserving of it! Our social status and our human measures about who is successful and who is not, do not ultimately matter before God. Our human worth is not dependent on our degrees, accomplishments, wealth, knowledge, work ethic or any such measure. Our human worth comes from the Spirit of God within us. All of us are created in the image of God. This was a very radical message in Jesus’ time. In the Middle East honor is what makes for one’s status in society. Honor was not dependent on wealth. One could have a lot of money but have no social standing (e.g., Zacchaeus). Honor had to do with the family name, morality and knowledge. The woman with hemorrhage had no honor because she was ritually unclean. According to her society she was not worthy of Jesus’ touch. But Jesus noticed her and felt her touch.

The same challenge faces us today where we put so much stock into money and education. Even though we say everyone is created equally, it is hard to put this belief into practice. Human worth as something inherent in our human existence is hard when our economic system is built on the idea of survival of the fittest.

In his book, *On Human Worth*, Scottish theologian Duncan Forrester struggles with these issues of inequality. As a young man he served as an educational missionary in India where he taught politics. On the way to work every day he encountered a beggar called Munuswamy. That daily meeting with inequality in the face of Munuswamy has haunted him ever since. In the book he agonizes with his sense of powerlessness to bring about fundamental socio-economic and cultural change that would end the plight of all beggars. As he notes of his own city of Edinburgh, it is a phenomenon not only on the streets of India but also shamefully and increasingly on the streets of twenty-first century Britain. A few coins and a kindly conversation are not enough. He knows this and so he wrestles with the reality of inequality and struggles to reconcile it with his Christian belief that all human beings are created in God's image and therefore are of equal worth.

Jesus saw human worth in both the woman in the crowd and the daughter of an important leader. He responded with care and love to both of them. This was radical for his time and it is still radical for our time. This kind of care that sees human worth based on God's love for each and every human and creature is hard for us to practice. I was amazed at how many people have been mourning the death of Michael Jackson while thousands of children die every day with no even knowing their name. We can only do it through the work of the Holy Spirit in us. All of our political discussions about health care reform and other such issues can become ways to get at the other side if we do not wrestle with the issues of God's love and care in the world even for those whom we deem unacceptable or unworthy of our care and love. We can also see this as a challenge to us when we make our worth dependent on our accomplishments.

In their book, *If Grace Is True*, Philip Gulley and James Mulholland share their struggle with letting go of their judgments of who is worthy of God's love and who is not, who is going to heaven and who is going to hell. They tell this story from one of their experiences in being pastors, "I remember sitting in my office one day when Betty came to see me. She told me that she'd decided she was ready to join the church. I cringed. Betty was a worn woman who lived in a broken-down house with five large dogs, several cats, her homosexual son with AIDS, and a man to whom she wasn't married. She was a mess. What would people think if we allowed her to join our church? Instead of welcoming her, I told her she needed to get her life together. She needed to become a good person. Betty went away sad. She never again asked to join us. Over the next few years, I ran into Betty time and again. She was always gracious to me. She was often carrying some animal she'd found abandoned, which she'd care for until she could find it a home. Other times she was returning from helping some neighbor. When the woman down the street came down with cancer, Betty spent hours caring for her. I learned one day that one of her children was severely handicapped and that she drove a hundred miles to visit him nearly every week. She...challenged my easy judgments about who is good and who is bad. I discovered fewer and fewer people were truly wicked. My reservation list for hell continued to shrink."

May the grace of God's love challenge our hearts every day so that we are able to extend this kind of unconditional love which Jesus offered to the two daughters of Israel. We are invited to see others and even see ourselves in the light of God's love. Amen.