

# **Jairus's Daughter and a Woman's Faith**

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## Mark 5:21-43<sup>1</sup>

And when Jesus had crossed again in a boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered about him; and he was beside the sea. Then came one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name; and seeing him, he fell at his feet, and besought him, saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." And he went with him. And a great crowd followed him and pressed round him.

And there was a woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years, and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spend all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard reports about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. For she said, "If I touch even his garments, I shall be made well." And immediately the hemorrhage ceased; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone forth from him, immediately turned about in the crowd, and said, "Who touched my garments?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, 'Who touched me?'" And he looked around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had been done to her, came in fear and trembling and fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.

And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

While he was still speaking, there came from the ruler's house some who said, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But ignoring what they said, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." And he allowed no one to follow him except Peter and James and John the brother of James. When they came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, he saw a tumult, and people weeping and wailing loudly. And when he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a tumult and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. Taking her by the hand he said to her, Talitha cumi"; which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise." And immediately the girl got up and walked; for she was twelve years old. And immediately they were overcome with amazement. And he strictly charged them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

### Part I - Experiencing Symbols

It is said that a Unitarian Universalist is open to all religions except the one he or she came out of. Although there is much truth in the assertion, today's service is a evidence that it is not the complete truth, for we three presenters were each at one time a Christian, and are no longer, but we are exploring a passage of Christian scripture, investigating its symbolism.

If you have come out of Christianity and are still angry with it, this may be a difficult service for you. Be prepared in advance.

Symbols can be experienced on four levels: the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical.

At the literal level, the symbol - here the story called "Jairus's daughter and a woman's faith" - is experienced as itself. You will hear the story several times today so that you can become familiar with it at the literal level.

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1. This passage is read three or four times during the service, between the other parts.

And the story can be thought about at the literal level. You can examine the details, the variations, the words and assumptions of the story. You can ask if it was true and how it could have happened.

At the allegorical level, the elements in the story are interpreted as referring to things other than themselves, particularly things unknowable or only partially knowable. In Christianity, there is a doctrine that Jesus is completely God and completely Man. The practical meaning of this is that when reading a story about Jesus, you are encouraged to let Jesus represent God, or mankind, or yourself. Each of these readings may be meaningful. If you don't like the word "God," then let Jesus represent The Divine, The Spiritual, Life, The Universe, The Depths of Existence, The Ground of Our Being, or whatever noun phrase you use to refer to that for which no noun phrase is adequate.

At the moral level, the symbol seems to show you your own life; it seems to talk directly to you. This is accompanied by a sense of insight and often by emotion. When the emotion is strong, it will be felt in the body. The meaning will often be hard for you, like Scrooge visited by the three spirits, being shown his life, and knowing he must change.

You experience the moral level by taking a part in the story. In this story, you play the part of the woman with the flow of blood, or of Jairus, or of his daughter, or of the crowd at his house, or of Jesus.

Traditionally the anagogical level deals with last things: death, judgement, heaven, hell. I have encountered an alternative interpretation of the anagogical level, as where you lose both yourself and the literal symbol itself. The associations of the symbol reverberate and sweep through your mind - a mystical experience.

Today we shall approach the story of Jairus's daughter and the woman's faith at the literal, allegorical, and moral levels only. We do not, most of us, believe in the last things, and as for the alternative explanation, we are not sure how to evoke the anagogical level even in ourselves, let alone convey it to others, so for that you are on your own.

### ***Mark 5:21-43 read again***

## **Part II - The Literal**

When I was a child and heard this story, the meaning was quite clear to me. The woman had a psychosomatic illness; she thought that touching Jesus would cure her; she touched him; and sure enough, her psychosomatic illness went away. Jesus was speaking quite literally when he said, "Your faith has made you well"; that was precisely what cured her.

As for Jairus's daughter, Jesus said she was asleep, and so she was; she woke up.

This is an example of dealing with the story on a literal level.

Another way to deal with the story on a literal level is the way scholars do when they study the meanings of the words, the variations of the text, and the cultural assumptions in the story.

For example, looking through the Gospel parallels, we discover that Mark has the most complete version of the story, and that Luke follows Mark quite closely. In Matthew, Jesus speaks the words "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well," and the words cure the woman, not simply the touch. In Matthew also, Jairus is not named, and he petitions for his daughter to be raised from the dead, not simply healed. In both Matthew and Luke, the woman touches one of the tassels that Jesus, as an observant Jew, wore at the four corners of his cloak.

Luke adds that Jairus's daughter was his only child. Luke also has the woman declare her healing "in the presence of all the people," because Luke liked to tell about public demonstrations of Jesus's power. Strangely, Luke preserved Mark's version where Jesus charged Jairus, his family, and the disciples to tell no one of the cure of the daughter. Mark was fond of "Messianic secrets"; Luke preferred to end with public acclaim.

Scholars also point out that by Jewish custom, both a menstruating woman and a corpse are ceremonially defiled and should not be touched. For that matter, the request that Jesus lay his hands on the daughter to heal her is strange: curing by laying on of hands is not mentioned in the Old Testament nor rabbinical writings.

These observations by scholars may aid in understanding the story, but notice that they are still at the literal level. They do not exhaust the possibilities.

### ***Mark 5:21-43 read again***

### **Part III - The Allegorical**

The fact that the story of the woman's faith is included in the story of Jairus's daughter invites us to look for parallels between them. The fact that the woman's illness lasted twelve years and that Jairus's daughter was twelve years old urges this even more strongly.

We can equate the woman with Jairus's daughter, both were ill. The woman's illness involved sterility; the continuing flow of blood made her infertile. Jairus's daughter was twelve years old, just about the age a woman first becomes fertile, and she was dying.

There is a contrast between them as well. The woman living in the world, but sterile on the inside. The daughter was alive within herself, but dead to the world.

If we consider Jairus's daughter to be a part of Jairus himself, we can equate the woman with Jairus. Twelve years is a long time in a woman's reproductive life; it is a long time in a man's. If, as Luke has it, Jairus's daughter was his only child, her death represents as much of his fertility as the woman's hemorrhage represents of hers.

Both the woman and Jairus sought healing through Jesus's touch. Both had faith it would cure the illness. In the case of the woman, this faith seems no more than a superstition driven by desperation. Jairus was also driven by desperation and was well-educated enough to know better: laying on hands was not an approved medical technique. Jairus had it the worse of the two: fretting while Jesus spent precious time with the woman, then being told his daughter was dead, then being laughed at.

If Jesus is to represent The Spiritual, then both the woman and Jairus were seeking a touch of The Spiritual. Jairus was an important man, and his need was urgent. The woman is not reported as being important, and there was no urgency about her illness. Yet Jesus, or The Spiritual, took time for both of them.

Looking more closely at the illnesses, since they both involved sterility, health would be fertility. Allowing the biological to symbolize the spiritual, we can translate "health" into "creativity." Christianity makes much of God being "the Creator," which implies that creativity is godliness; creativity is essentially spiritual.

And so here we have an allegorical understanding of the story: the illness is the sterility of life, and faith is a desperate craving for a touch of the spiritual, which will allow creativity to come again.

#### ***Mark 5:21-43 read again***

### **Statements**

There remains the moral level. Does the story show you your own life? Does it speak directly to you?

*[At this point, several members presented their statements finding meaning in the story for their personal lives.]*

### **Benediction**

You are the people from Jairus's house: you view with skepticism and a knowledge of hard facts. You are the crowd; you laugh.

You are the woman. Is your creativity being dissipated? Have you tried everything? Have you nearly lost hope? Has it been too long?

I tell you it has not been too long. Do not lose hope. Your creativity shall return.

Are you too unsophisticated? Do you not understand the spiritual well enough? Is your faith only a desperate superstition?

I tell you, you do not have to understand deeply. Even those who have studied long and deeply can do no more than touch the hem of the spiritual.

Are you too unimportant?

I tell you the spiritual has time for you.

You are Jairus.

Is it too late? Is the spiritual dead within you?

I tell you it is only sleeping and will be reawakened.

Are you afraid of people's laughter?

Pay them no heed. Do not lose heart.

You are the woman and the daughter.  
Are you unclean? Unworthy?  
The spiritual will touch you.

You are Jesus.

When others in desperation reach out to you, notice their touch, take time for them, even when there are urgent and important things to do, even if you feel your power draining.

When people ask you for help, don't let them lose heart, protect them from others' laughter. When you help, do not let them inflate you with praise.

You are Jesus and the woman and Jairus and his daughter.

Take time for yourself, your weakness, your neediness. Don't always rush to handle the important and urgent things around you. Have confidence, despite hard facts, despite derision, that the spiritual will come, that health and creativity will come.