

A Daughter Says, “I Am Not Okay”

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on January 23, 2020, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.

Scripture: Mark 5:22-42

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In my preparation for today’s sermon, last week I was doing some internet research and came across a Washington Post article from April 2020. In a narrow buff-colored band, there was a banner just above the headline with a little image of a clock and the notice that “This article is more than **1 year old.**” “1 year old” was also in bold letters. This little banner made me think several things. The first is that I was slightly offended. I mean, I can read. I’m perfectly capable of scrolling down and seeing the date of April 20, 2020 and recognizing that the information in that article might be out-of-date.

My second thought was about the odd sense of time that I think we’ve all acquired since March 2020. On the one hand, April 2020—a month into sheltering in place, a time before vaccines and with only a rudimentary understanding of how the virus worked and how to keep ourselves safe—seems like it was only yesterday. With the latest omicron surge, many of us again are hesitant to leave the house, are ordering groceries online, and are reluctant to gather with friends and family. It might as well be April 2020. At the same time, April 2020 seems like a very long time ago.

My third thought was about the unnamed woman in Mark’s gospel whose story Liz read to us a few minutes ago. We’ve suffered through a life-changing pandemic for only two years; she had suffered for 12 long years from a debilitating condition that had kept her marginalized from her family and community. On the one hand, what do I have to complain about? On the other hand, how much longer will we endure our own suffering?

Our story from Mark happens as Jesus’s ministry is really getting into full swing. He has been teaching in parables throughout Galilee and has started to become widely known for healing the sick and other deeds of great power. Just before this section of chapter five, he has stilled a storm on the Sea of Galilee and exorcised a legion of demons from an outcast man living among the tombs—which is the story you’ll hear next week in our final sermon in this series. Even though he tells the people he healed not to tell anyone what happened to them, word is getting around that Jesus has great healing power, and two people come to him, hoping for his help.

The author of Mark uses an interesting literary device with these two stories, and it’s worth noticing, because I think the two healing stories are meant to be read together. This device is called “intercalation.” This is also a chemistry term, so you scientists out there might know that intercalation is to insert something in between layers. In a literary sense this means that the author begins one story, then starts another story before finishing the first, making a sort of literary sandwich. At least five times in the gospel, Mark uses this intercalary device. We’re not exactly sure why, but it does make us pay attention to these sandwiched stories in a way we might not otherwise. Just like an actual sandwich, the sandwiched stories need to be seen together. You wouldn’t want to only eat the bread of a good sandwich, or only the innards—you

want to eat the whole thing. And so, even though it might be tempting to study *only* the story about Jairus and his daughter, or *only* the healing of the hemorrhaging woman, we learn more by studying them together, which it seems is what Mark intended us to do.

When we see these two stories together, we notice the contrasts between the characters. Jairus is a leader of the synagogue, which meant that he is a person of wealth and status in his community, someone who could afford to provide or maintain the building for the synagogue. By contrast, the woman who desperately reaches out to touch the hem of Jesus's robe is, quite likely, an outcast. She has no name and is only described as one who has been bleeding for twelve years. She has spent all her money on doctors and is now destitute, and desperate for healing. Her physical ailment is only part of her problem; her bleeding would have made her ritually impure by Jewish custom. She wouldn't have been able to take part in religious rituals or enter the temple. Friends and family would not have been able to touch her or touch anything she had touched, without undergoing a ritual cleansing afterward. In fact, she was violating taboos by coming out into the crowd where others would be able to touch her, and she certainly violated the rules by reaching out to touch the clothing of Jesus.¹

This woman couldn't be any more different from Jairus or his daughter, a beloved child of a wealthy community leader. She was one of the most marginalized sorts of people in her community. But Jesus doesn't marginalize her or punish her for reaching out. Instead, he acknowledges her healing. He even renames her—he calls her “daughter,” equating her now with the beloved daughter of Jairus, pulling her back into the community, and affirming her identity as a child of God. He sets her free from the restrictions of her illness and marginalization, and sets her on the path of a new, hopeful future.

Notice, though, that just because he stops to heal the woman, that Jairus and his daughter don't miss out on the healing. In our society, we tend to assume that one person's gain means another's loss. We tend to think that, if the last shall be first, it means those who were first will be excluded, but this isn't so in God's kingdom. The reign of God means that *all* shall be fed, and *all* shall be healed, and *all* shall have enough.² The unnamed woman, so often last in her community, receives healing first, but Jairus's daughter is also healed.

Seeing these two stories side-by-side illuminates how—despite their difference in community status—both Jairus and the unnamed woman have one important similarity; they are both determined to reach out to Jesus for help. In the depths of their suffering, they realize that they cannot manage their grief or their illness alone, and they call out for help. They both say to Jesus, essentially, “I am not okay, and I need help.”

And this makes me think of another quirk of our society; we are, for the most part, reluctant to ask for help. Is this something you have trouble with? I asked why this might be so in our Monday Morning Bible Study this week, and here is a compendium of their answers, along with a few I thought of or read about. See if any of these resonate with you:

- It makes me feel shame—like I am “less than”

¹ William C. Placher, *Mark* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2010), 82.

² *Ibid.*, 83.

- It means I'm admitting my imperfection
- It means I'm putting someone else out; I don't want to bother people
- It's difficult to admit that I'm not the strong one in charge anymore
- I assume that people are going to say no when I ask
- I don't want to be a burden
- It means I am no longer in control of my situation
- It makes me feel uncomfortable and vulnerable
- I'm supposed to be self-sufficient and independent

Our reluctance to ask for help, and the associated feelings we have when we do reach out, are likely the result of living in our highly individualistic culture. Individualistic cultures, like the United States and many Western European countries, “stress the needs of the individual over the needs of the group as a whole. In this type of culture, people are seen as independent and autonomous. [...] In individualistic cultures, people are considered "good" if they are strong, self-reliant, assertive, and independent. [...] Being dependent upon others is often considered shameful or embarrassing. [...] People tend to be [—or at least value being—] self-reliant. [...] Individualistic cultures stress that people should be able to solve problems or accomplish goals on their own without having to rely on assistance from others. People are often expected to ‘pull themselves up by their bootstraps’ when they encounter setbacks.”³ With this sort of cultural messaging, it's no wonder we have trouble asking for help.

By contrast, those who live in collectivist cultures “tend to see themselves as part of a larger group rather than focus on their individuality. As a result, they value behavior that emphasizes unity. Individual goals and needs are [diminished] for the good of the greater whole.”⁴ Rather than self-reliance and strength, “collectivist cultures value characteristics like being self-sacrificing, dependable, generous, and helpful to others.”⁵ Instead of independence, collectivist cultures emphasize interdependence.

Friends, did you notice that the values held by collectivistic cultures are values expressed in our Christian faith? As Christians, we are called to unity in the body of Christ. We're called to love and care for each other in our community. We're called to generously support each other and to gratefully and joyfully receive help when it's offered. Yet in our society, we live in constant tension between our individualistic culture and our collectivistic Christian tradition.

It is my prayer that as we navigate this tension, we will be pulled toward the collectivistic values of our Christian faith. Let us build a generous, unified, interdependent community, rooted in our faith, characterized by Christian love for all. Let us know that, as Jairus and the unnamed woman did, we can reach out, and there will be a hand to hold. Amen.

³ Kendra Cherry, “Individualist Cultures and Behavior,” *Verywell Mind*, December 11, 2020. <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-are-individualistic-cultures-2795273>. Accessed on January 22, 2022.

⁴ “Collectivism,” The Decision Lab. <https://thedeclaration.com/reference-guide/psychology/collectivism/>, Accessed on January 22, 2022.

⁵ Cherry, *ibid.*