

## **Reflection: Living with the Questions**

### **4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost June 29, 2009**

A Christian writer by the name of Ron Levin described one of his seminary professors, a man who was “quite stiff in his bearing and rigid in his theology. One time when the students sang Christmas carols at his home, they discovered that he wore his clergy collar even with his pajamas and robe.” Can you imagine what a man such as this might have said to the nameless woman in today’s Gospel reading? I think it might be something along these lines:

"How dare you reduce the power of God to a magic trick? That’s all superstitious nonsense. Good theology isn’t about what we can get from God, but on giving glory to God. Don’t you realise that you’re turning faith into nothing more than hocus pocus? Do you really think that God will help you when you have such a childish approach to religion? You really need to re-think your theology before you bother Jesus with something like this!" [adapted from Ron Lavin, *The Advocate*, CSS Publishing]

That’s what such a man MIGHT have said. But it’s not what Jesus says. He doesn’t take time to correct the woman's theology. He does not give her a lecture on appropriate or inappropriate ways of approaching faith.

He just heals her. He even *commends* her faith (Mark 5:34). It may be hard for us to wrap our minds around this story from our 21<sup>st</sup> century rational scientific worldview, but it strikes me that that is a very good reason for us to consider the two healing stories we have today. We have two people, with what I'm guessing would be very different lives and different approaches to faith – yet they come together out of a desperate need and vulnerability to ask of Jesus for what they cannot find anywhere else.

We have a woman who is an outcast from her society, unable to mix with others because of purity laws that declare she is unclean because of her illness. She is probably poor, illiterate, and desperate. She is also courageous! She is not confident enough in herself to disturb the Master as he teaches and ask for healing. But she has enough confidence, or is needy enough, that she discards everything her society says about her and pushes through the crowds to touch the tassels of Jesus' robe. She takes the risk, and believes, because she has no other choice left to her.

Jairus, on the other hand, is wealthy, a leader in the synagogue, a person who knows the Scriptures and teachings of the Law. He has probably talked about Jesus with his colleagues, perhaps expressed scepticism about this so-called prophet and healer. But

he too, is desperate – not for himself, but for his daughter. Society would likely wonder about such overt concern for a mere girl-child; but he loves his daughter, and is desperate enough to seek out help, even at the cost of the ridicule of his colleagues, and perhaps even, against the counsel of his own reason. He places his trust in Jesus, because there is nowhere else to go.

Both receive the healing they sought, but it is the woman's simple, uneducated, courageous faith that is praised by Jesus. That's a bit of a difficulty for many United Church people. Many of us pride ourselves on a rational approach to faith. "We're not like those other churches," we say to ourselves, "with their chattering tongues and their simplistic beliefs and their angels and demons at war and their faith healings and their superstitions. No, we have a faith that *makes sense!*" So say many of us on the more liberal edges of the church, though theological positions vary a lot in the United Church of Canada. In the United Church of Canada, we have people who believe that the Bible was dictated word for word by God, and we have people who believe Scripture is a collection of humanly-created teachings and myths that are useful for teaching universal truths. We have people who believe in a literal resurrection of the dead and we have people who believe that resurrection is a metaphor for the newness and hope that occurs in human living. We have people

who believe in miracles, and people who don't; people who believe in angels, and people who don't; people who believe in a literal heaven and hell and people who aren't sure there's any afterlife at all. One person's truth is another person's superstition; one person's rational analysis is another person's heresy. We are a broad cross-section of the Christian church here, and the United Church has always been that way.

But when it comes right down to it, what we believe intellectually, may not really matter all that much, when we hit the hard times in life. When we are driven to our knees by fear, or doubt, or pain, where do we turn? Where do we go, when there is no-one else to turn to? Do we turn to Jesus, or not? That may be the ultimate question. It is a question about faith, not as intellectual belief, but as trust. Trust is what Jesus praised, in the healing of that poor woman. Trust invited him into the pain that poor father was feeling, and allowed him to bring new life.

The question of whether Jesus could or could not perform healing miracles, or whether God still does, is a 21<sup>st</sup> century question, not a 1<sup>st</sup> century one. For Mark, this story is not about the miracle itself; none of Jesus' miracles are. In Mark's gospel, the miracles are always signposts – directions to guide us to a discovery of who Jesus is. It's hard, when reading healing stories, not to

go into all of our questions about faith healing; but if that's not what the stories are really about, then maybe we better try to figure out what they ARE about.

What do we learn about Jesus, then, from these miracles? We learn that he is not concerned with religious law, as much as he is concerned with the wellbeing of people. We learn that his compassion is extended to people at the centre of power and to people at the margins – though, interestingly, he is depicted as interrupting the call to minister to the powerful by stopping to share healing with the lowly. That's more than a little bit unusual.

When we look deeper into the text, we learn that in the power to give life, he is set on par with Elijah, the greatest prophet of Israel, who the ancient Scriptures say brought the son of the widow of Nairn back to life. People in Jesus' time would have made that connection. He is also connected with the high priesthood, where there was a tradition that the priest must change garments before leaving the Holy of Holies lest the sanctity of that place cling to their clothing and be spent unwisely in contact with other people. Of course, if Jesus is high priest, he's rather different from the one's known to the people. Rather than the uncleanness of the woman contaminating Jesus, his holiness becomes contagious and brings

healing in its wake. What a great concept! Hanging around with Jesus, holiness can be catching!

There is so much to learn about Jesus: to learn with the head, and learn with the heart. Some of us find the head-learning more challenging; some of us the heart-learning. All of us, can grow in our knowledge of Jesus, and yes, grow in our *trust*, too.

Interestingly, the one who comes to Jesus for the sake of his daughter is named Jairus, which means, “The one who is to be enlightened”. The educated, wealthy, important man is in need of enlightenment; the poor, simple, ignorant woman, is the one whose faith is praised. I think there is an important corrective here to the arrogance of the modern world. Modernity taught us that there is nothing that cannot be apprehended or explained through reason. The post-modern world has not given up on scientific inquiry, but has begun to recognize just how much we don’t know, and cannot know, with absolute certainty, because what we think we know is shaped by our own particular experience and way of viewing the world. The post-modern world has again made room for mystery – has allowed us the freedom to ask questions and know that our answers are only partial, conditional, and may even be unique to us as individuals and as a particular Christian

community. Perhaps it may also help us to have faith, even when we don't have all the answers.

I want to ask you, as you reflect on these stories today, to ponder these questions (I've put them in the bulletin for you). You may want to talk about them with the folk at your table as we share lunch after church, or you may just want to think about them on your own:

What do you **KNOW** for certain about Jesus and about God?

What do you **BELIEVE** with your head to be true about Jesus and about God?

What experiences have you had that made you **QUESTION OR CHANGE** those beliefs?

Have those experiences made it easier or harder to **TRUST** in Jesus?

Take those questions with you into the week, and may God bless you as you seek to grow in your knowledge of and trust in God and in Christ Jesus. Amen.