

The Healing of Jairus

Hespeler, 27 June 2021 © Scott McAndless

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27, Psalm 130, 2 Corinthians 8:7-15, Mark 5:21-43

On the night when Jairus' daughter was born, the midwife came late, very late even though he had sent for her at the first sign that his wife was going into labour. Jairus was a well respected and influential man in the community, the kind of man that people turn to for advice and wisdom, but in this situation he felt completely out of his depth. This was to be his and his wife's first child and Jairus did not want to show it, but he really had no idea what he was doing. He was also terrified because he did not have a clue whether or not he had it in him to be a father and to raise a child.

So, while he waited and waited far too long for the midwife to come, while he listened to his wife's discomfort and distress and felt completely unable to help her, he worked himself into a frenzy. He thought of all the worst stories he had ever heard of childbirth, of the mothers who bled out and the babies who came out still and blue. He knew that that kind of thing happened far too often, and he knew that he could not bear either of those possibilities.

By the time the midwife finally arrived, his wife's cries were becoming frighteningly frequent. When he heard the clap at the door, he was ready to curse her and call her a monster for leaving them all in the lurch. But, then he saw her face and he could say nothing. She was pale and shaking; she looked like she had seen a ghost. And so, when she mumbled something about having had to take care of another woman, he simply let her pass and go into his wife.

Talitha is Born

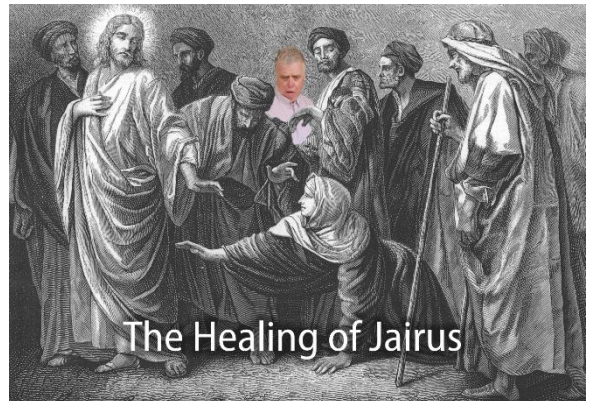
It was only later, once his wife had been safely delivered (thanks be to God!), that the midwife had told the story. And she didn't tell Jairus (who wouldn't have understood) but only the new mother who then told it to Jairus later. That night, Jairus hadn't cared, of course, because he was only relieved to know that both his wife and his new child were alive and well.

The child was a girl. And Jairus knew that he was supposed to feel disappointed by that fact. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. As he held his newborn daughter in his arms, as she wrapped her tiny little fingers around his thumb, he knew that she was the most precious thing in all the world for him. He knew that there was nothing that he wouldn't do for her – absolutely nothing.

They named the girl after her grandmother, but Jairus would hardly ever use that name. In his heart she would always remain his little girl and so that is what he always preferred to call her – Talitha in Aramaic.

Why the Midwife was late

Later, once everything began to settle down in the household, once nursing and sleeping had found a certain rhythm and Jairus and his wife could find some time to speak, she told him what the midwife had told her. She had had a very good reason for being so late. She had received an emergency call to go to the house of a woman in the town – a wealthy



woman who lived in a fine home. At first the midwife had rejoiced to receive the call for she knew that this woman had been yearning to have a child for a long time and thought that perhaps it had finally happened. When she arrived at the home, she was dismayed to discover how wrong she was.

The woman's husband, who had always been a brute, had taken his frustration out on her. Whether he was angry with her for her failure to produce him a child or it was some other offense he had taken wasn't clear. It probably didn't matter. What did matter was that he had taken all of his anger out on her body. In particular, he had wounded her deep within. The midwife was overwhelmed by what she saw but she knew her duty and grimly set to work. She did what she could to staunch the flow of blood, but the damage was too great.

By the time the midwife left for what promised to be a much more joyful duty, the woman was at least stable. The midwife felt fairly confident that she was going to live, but also that she never would have a child now. She hoped that the remaining flow of blood would eventually stop, but she had seen this kind of case before, and she knew that it might not.

Twelve Years for Jairus

Twelve years passed – twelve years during which Talitha grew and thrived and, if it is possible, Jairus felt as if he loved her more each day. He marvelled as he rediscovered the whole world through her eyes. And he felt it in his body every single time she stubbed a toe or bled a knee. His life seemed full as it never had before, and he didn't even mind when it became increasingly clear that he and his wife were fated to have no more children.

There were some things that troubled him during those golden years though. A few years after Talitha's birth, he was elected as a ruler in the local synagogue. You should not think of that in quite the way that people might in the twenty-first century. When you hear the word synagogue, you should not imagine a beautiful stone or even wooden building where the entire community gathered to pray on Sabbath.

There were very few such structures in Galilee in those days. They had no need of such places then when the temple in Jerusalem still stood and provided a place for all the people to pray. But the word synagogue has never referred to a building. It simply refers to the act of gathering in the community and, at that time, such gatherings could be for various reasons both sacred and secular. As a ruler in the synagogue, Jairus was responsible to protect the integrity of the whole community and there was one particular difficulty with that in all those twelve years.

Twelve Years for the Woman

It was about the woman who had held up the midwife on that night. She never truly healed from her wounds and the flow of blood continued uninterrupted. So the twelve years that were such joy for Jairus were nothing but pain and struggle for her. Her affliction consumed her and her identity, so much so that people soon forgot her name and referred to her only by her condition. She became nothing more and nothing less than the woman with the flow of blood. Her husband took no responsibility for what he had done – indeed he continually blamed her for everything. Before long he divorced her and would have left her with nothing, but in this she was at least a bit more fortunate than some would have been. She had come into the marriage with a significant dowry and, according to law and custom, she managed to hold onto a significant portion of it.

The wealth didn't really do her much good, though. She spent almost all of it as she consulted with far too many doctors who tried their cures on her. She suffered many pains and indignities at their hands – honestly, some of them treated her worse than her husband had – but not one of them could produce the cure that he promised.

Jairus' Struggles with the Woman

But that was her problem. Jairus struggled with a different one. As a ruler of the synagogue, he was responsible to protect the whole community. And one of the things that affected the community was blood. The kind of flow of blood that this woman had was particularly powerful because it was blood that represented both the potential of life and of death. This blood was so potent that it needed to be sequestered, set apart. And so it was that Jairus had the duty of making sure that she did not come into contact with the assembly or really with anybody. And Jairus was nothing if not a responsible man. He took his duties very seriously. He's zealously made sure that the woman with the flow of blood was cut off from every sort of social contact. He truly believed that it was the right thing to do.

And so it was, that for twelve long years, this woman suffered from a third scourge. Not only did she suffer from the pain of her body and the tortures of the physicians, she was also constantly afflicted by this man, Jairus, and the worst part was that he behaved as if what he was doing to her was nothing but a noble burden that he himself had to bear.

Talitha Fades

After those twelve years had passed, little Talitha was no longer quite as little as she had been. Puberty was approaching and Jairus knew that that would bring many changes both for him and for his little girl. What he never anticipated was that it might just not come at all. She was taken by a sudden fever and quickly grew worse. Jairus sent for the best doctors that could be found but, well, we've already seen how the ministrations of those doctors could often make things much worse. Jairus began to despair as he watched his precious Talitha fade away.

But it was just then that a servant came running into Jairus' house. A fishing boat had just been spotted coming in off the lake. The word spreading through town like wildfire was that it was the teacher, Jesus from Nazareth, who had an enormous reputation as a healer and a wonder worker. Jairus did not hesitate even a moment. He was out his door like a shot.

The Incident on the Way to Jairus' House

Jairus moved through the town's streets at Jesus' side. He had used all of the influence and respect that he had stored up among the people over the last twelve years to push himself into the front rank and be the first to meet Jesus as he stepped out of the boat. But then, Jairus had dissolved into tears. He had thrown himself to the ground as he begged the teacher to save his beloved Talitha. He no longer cared if anyone thought less of him for that.

And Jesus had seen his distress and had not hesitated to come. But now the people were everywhere, pressing against them from every side, but Jairus begged them to let the healer through as the need was very urgent.

They were making good progress until Jesus suddenly stopped. "Who touched me?" he wanted to know. Jairus could not believe this. Did Jesus not understand how little time they had? They had to

keep moving. Jairus answered impatiently, “Teacher, how can you ask, ‘Who touched me?’ Did you see this crowd? I mean, who didn’t touch you?” But Jesus was insistent. “No, no, I felt the power go out of me. It’s not the same.”

It was at that moment that Jairus’ eye caught the movement of someone out of the street and into the alleyway. He knew that face. It was the woman with the flow of blood who had caused him nothing but trouble since the day of his daughter’s birth, the woman from whom he had had to protect the whole community all that time. And suddenly he understood. It must have been her who had touched the teacher, probably looking for the healing that had so long eluded her. Did this woman really have to spoil everything about his life?

Three Healings

You may have heard the rest of the story. By the end of the day, two extraordinary healings had taken place. The woman whose blood had flowed for twelve years felt the flow dry up. And Jairus’ twelve year old girl was returned to her father safe and well. But do we recognize that there was a third healing as well? For Jairus, that highly respected ruler in the synagogue, did not leave that day unchanged. Firstly, Jesus’ compassion and care for a woman whom he had only seen has a threat and bother to his community, made him rethink how he’d looked at her. He had seen her, after all, only in terms of how she complicated his life. But even only a few moments and a few words from Jesus had made Jairus realize that she had dealt with things that he could hardly dream of and that she, too, was a child of Abraham and Sarah and infinitely worthy of God’s care.

And he was also forced to see that his daughter was not merely his little girl, that she was now a woman in her own rights. After twelve years, two women took their place in the community. One for the first time and one finally restored to her place. And Jairus knew as he had never known before, how deeply blessed the whole community would be by both of them. He vowed that he would never let the community forget that again.

What Mark Wants us to Learn

The story of Jairus’ daughter and of the woman with the flow of blood is told in a very particular way in the Gospel of Mark. Mark uses a literary device that he employs a number of times in his Gospel. Biblical scholars have called it an intercalation. He begins one story, interrupts it with a second, and then, once the second story has completed, goes on to finish the first one. Mark does this so often in his gospel that you know that this is not just a random thing. He is trying to get the readers to understand something important through the juxtaposition of the two stories every time he does it.

So I looked at this particular pair of stories and I asked myself what connection Mark wants us to make between the two of them and what he is trying to show us with that connection. I noticed this time that the woman had had her flow of blood for the exact same length of time that Jairus had been a father to Talitha. I wondered, given that Jairus was a leader in what was probably a small town, how Jairus might have come into contact with that woman over the years. My wondering led me to this story. My conclusion, this time, was that maybe Mark was trying to teach us something through the character of Jairus himself.