

Mark doesn't begin these two inter-connected stories by saying, "The kingdom of God is like...", but he might have. Indeed, compared with his Synoptic cousins, Mark doesn't share all that many of Jesus' parables (and most of the few he does we've already touched on), and yet weaving together of these two stories feels rather parabolic, as it offers one picture of Jesus' ministry and God's reign that we preachers might "throw alongside" (the literal meaning of παραβολή) the picture of our life in the world.

Central to this parable is the vulnerability of the characters and, even more, Jesus' response to that vulnerability. Consider for a moment how simultaneously different and similar are the three characters involved in this scene. First the difference. Jairus, a leader in the local Synagogue who by gender, position, and status enjoys a comfortable, if not also enviable, level of power and prestige. An unnamed woman afflicted for more than a decade with an illness that has not only been painful and potentially debilitating but also has more than likely moved her to the fringes of her community (see Num. 5:2-4). Finally, a young girl, sick unto death, who has no rights, no power, little life remaining, and no say in what will happen to her.

Three very different persons from different stations in life, yet all united in an extreme vulnerability. Jairus reduced to the painful impotence every parent feels when a beloved child is ill, such that he will throw himself into the posture of worship/begging to induce Jesus to help him. The woman pushed to brave the crowd and its potential hostility in the hope of only touching the healer passing through her town. A little girl wasting away with only hopes and prayers to surround her. Utterly different in station, utterly the same in condition.

And Jesus responds to each of them with compassion, naming both the unnamed woman and the little girl "daughter," calming the fears of both the woman on the fringe of society and the man who leads his synagogue with words of peace and courage, healing and restoring the girl to life and to her father and the woman to health and to her community.

Perhaps we've become so accustomed to Jesus' compassionate response that it doesn't make much of an impression on us, but just now, at this place in Mark's Gospel and at this point in our national history, I think it's worth noting that the very consistency, even predictability of this scene is what makes it so extraordinary.

Jesus responds to the vulnerability of these three different characters, restoring them to health, life, and wholeness... because he *always* responds to vulnerability, offering health, life, and wholeness to those in greatest need of them. He has just crossed once again the border between two opposing lands and contrasting, even hostile, cultures. His mission in both territories is the same – to seek out, heal, and restore those who are most vulnerable, a man possessed by demons on one side of the border and these three different yet identical characters in need on the other. And that has been the consistent, if not relentless, pattern of Mark's story about Jesus: he everywhere and always notices, cares for, and responds to those who are most vulnerable.

In today's reading, I was struck by the emphasis on touch. Jairus begs Jesus simply to lay his hands on his daughter, the woman wants simply to touch Jesus (and Jesus notices that he is touched because of the nearly reflexive discharge of healing power in response to that touch), and Jesus doesn't simply lay his hands on the young girl in healing (as her father asked), but takes her by hand and lifts her to life. And so Jesus doesn't simply respond to those in need theoretically or at a distance, but touches them, connects with them, and joins himself to them through his compassionate embrace.

Again, notice both the reflexive outpouring of power in response to the woman's need, but also the disciples' confusion: "Lots of people are touching you, Teacher, why ask which one?" Yet Jesus knows that amid the commotion one person in particular is in need, one person required his power, one person needed restoration.

This scene reminded me of the sermon preached by Dr. Martin Luther King at the National Cathedral in Washington on Sunday, March 31, 1968, just four days before he was struck down by an assassin's bullet. Inviting his listeners to place their struggles and calling in the context of God's ordering of the universe, King suggests that whatever differences we may experience, yet our mutual vulnerability and humanity unites us more deeply:

We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured. (1)

The disciples marvel that Jesus wants to know who touched him; in turn, he perhaps marvels that they don't sense the discharge of healing power that signals profound need. They don't seem to understand just how innately responsive, even sensitive, Jesus is to vulnerability.

Perhaps we who are his disciples today fail to understand that as well. There are times of late that I have felt nearly heartbroken not simply by our national insensitivity to vulnerability but by the use of our faith and Scripture to justify it. And, I will confess, I am also at times confused, even discouraged, by the realization that dear friends with whom I share a deep faith and for whom I have great love and respect at times see these matters so differently than I do. In my experience, while it is relatively easy to criticize the moral failings of those who stand at a distance and differ from me on various issues, it is harder when they are the people I care for, work with, minister to, love, and am often indebted to. I know that there is a time for the active critique of the prophet. Yet I have also learned to be suspicious of those times I am tempted to assume I am on the side of righteousness and those who differ from me are not, as I too easily overlook my own shortcomings and magnify those of others.

So this week, I invite us to imagine throwing this picture of the vulnerable Messiah who responds instinctively to human need and calls his disciples to do the same alongside a world where safety seems all too often privileged over compassion and fear and hate, rather than hope and love, are offered as the motivating impulses of this life. I will therefore endeavor not to chastise or lecture, and definitely try not to make someone feel unwelcome because they see this world and its challenges differently than I do. Instead, I will tell a story, even offer a parable, about a Savior who always and everywhere sees, cares, heals, and restores those who are most vulnerable, a Savior who also invites us to see ourselves as those for whom he reaches in healing and then sends forth in love. And as I do, I will say, "The kingdom of God is like this..." praying that it may be so among us.

Yours in Christ,
David