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2 Samuel 1: 1, 7 – 27
 2 Corinthians 8: 7 – 15

Ps. 130
 Mark 5: 21 – 43

Today, the Gospel of Mark serves us up a sandwich: a story layered in between two slices of another story. It's one of Mark's favorite literary techniques; he does it several times in his Gospel. By telling us a story wrapped in a story, Mark is letting us know that one story helps interpret the other. As the Rt. Rev. N. T. Wright explains, the flavor of the outer story adds zest to the inner one, and the taste of the inner story is meant to permeate the outer one.

The outer story, the bread, is the story of the healing of the synagogue leader, Jairus', daughter. The filling, the PB&J of the story, is, of course, the healing of the woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years – as long as this little girl has been alive. In some ways, the stories are very different:

- One story is about the healing of a young girl, while the other is about the healing of a woman who is older.
- Jairus and his daughter are in an entirely different social strata from the woman. Jairus is a community leader with some power and influence, and probably at least a little wealth. The unnamed woman, on the other hand, has been ritually unclean for all these many years. She is doubly marginalized because of her gender AND her malady. And Mark tells us that she has spent everything she had on doctors, only to end up worse, so she is also poverty stricken.
- Another difference between the stories is how these two people – Jairus and the woman – approach Jesus and how the healing comes about. Both Jairus and the woman approach Jesus in desperation, but Jairus comes openly – publicly throwing himself at Jesus' feet. He loves his daughter and he is so desperate to save her that he doesn't care about saving face. He's a community leader who himself is often approached for favors, but he's willing to be seen begging at the feet of this itinerant rabbi. Jairus casts aside all cares about decorum; the optics are a poor second compared to the life of his little girl. The woman, on the other hand, has probably wrapped herself up from head to toe to keep from being recognized. A woman with a flow of blood is completely taboo, and any contact with her, however slight, renders others unclean as well. She knows that the only way she can make it through the crowd is to be as non-descript and 'hidden' as possible. She doesn't even entertain the idea of approaching Jesus directly and asking for healing – she will merely touch the hem of his robe and that will be enough. She approaches with a quiet boldness of faith. He'll never have to know that she was there...
- A fourth difference is the condition of the woman and the girl. The woman suffers from a chronic condition that has devastated her life physically, financially and socially. The little girl's illness is apparently an acute condition – one that has come up suddenly and is life threatening – and, in fact, the little girl dies before Jesus arrives.
- Then there is the actual difference in healing. The woman reaches out merely to touch Jesus' robe. Even with all the jostling of the crowd, Jesus feels his healing energy draining from him, rather like the woman's energy that has, for so long, drained away from her. With the little girl, it's Jesus who reaches out. In the presence of only her parents and three of Jesus' disciples, Jesus reaches out and takes the little girl's lifeless hand and says, "*Talitha kum*, little girl, get up." At once, the little girl is revived.

But despite all these differences, these two intertwined stories are really very much one and the same story. A story of faith, fear, new life, trust and courage. A story of people who come into contact with Jesus, who are healed and who regain their lives. One story with two healings, two miracles.

The gospels provide us with some spectacular stories of Jesus' miracles. In Barbara Brown Taylor's words, Jesus' miracles remind us that the way things are is not the way that they will always be. They also remind us that there is great power available to us through our relationship with Jesus. Jesus' miracles are proof that God desires wholeness and goodness for us, not chaos and brokenness. Each miracle is a little glimpse of the Kingdom of God.

Miracles are tricky, though. It's really hard to see one or hear about one and not want one for ourselves or for someone we know who is suffering. A loved one healed from a devastating disease or brought back to life. A chance to have a re-do on a larger-than-life mistake. A healed relationship. A world truly at peace. But miracles are hard to come by. Not everyone who prays for one gets one. Not even Jesus. On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus prays in the garden for the cup to be removed from him. But that isn't the answer he receives. And then there are those who don't even bother praying for a miracle, but who DO receive one. The seeming randomness of miracles defies any attempt we might try for gaming the system, trying to control them, or trying to manipulate God.

Jesus doesn't take any credit for healing the unnamed woman, and in fact, points to her faith as the real source of healing. And then, upon hearing that the little girl has died, Jesus says to her father, "Do not fear, only believe." Both of which sound as if the receiving of a miracle somehow depends upon the strength of our faith. But that really isn't what's at work here. Faith isn't based on miracles. And it isn't based on us. And faith doesn't work miracles. God does. Taylor writes, "To concentrate on the strength of our own belief is to practice magic. To concentrate on the strength of God is to practice faith."

Faith, as we said last Sunday, is a matter of entrusting ourselves so thoroughly to God's care that the pathway is wide open for God to work in us and through us. Faith is a genuine trust through which the power of God can work most freely. Faith is an attitude of wide-open, expectant trust that moves toward action. Faith is not a belief in a set of doctrines; faith is confidence in Jesus.

Miracles do not generate faith, but faith enables us to see miracles that are all around us. Taylor writes that when Jesus tells Jairus, "Do not fear, only believe," if Jairus is actually able to do this, he can survive whatever comes next, even if it means watching Jesus gently close his daughter's eyes with his finger tips and pull the sheet up over her head. Jairus' faith – his willingness to believe that his daughter is still in God's hands even though she has slipped from his own - will be the miracle at that point. Perhaps the real miracle in the Garden of Gethsemane is that Jesus decides to drink the cup anyway.

All that should not stop us from praying for miracles in this world, because – Heaven knows! – this world needs some miracles. And every time we hear of a miracle, or we witness one, or we are part of one, we need to remember, from a perspective of faith, that the gossamer veil between here and heaven has lifted for just a moment to give us a glimpse. Do not fear, only believe, Jesus tells Jairus. And us. May we believe. May we trust. May we have faith. May we keep our attitudes, our hearts, our lives, wide open for God to work in and through. +