

Pastor Adrienne Meier

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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Needed in the Kin-dom

Matthew 9:18-26

While he was [talking to John's disciples about fasting], suddenly a leader came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she was saying to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And the woman was made well from that moment.

When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, "Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread through all of that district.

In seminary, we read this text several times so we would immediately recognize the form—a story within a story. We were assured that it meant the outside story would tell us about the inside story, and vice versa. Which is funny, because all my study this week taught me was that this form really just means the inside story makes us uncomfortable. And if we're uncomfortable, we'll just ignore it, and talk around it. Bury it under other narratives until it disappears. When other lectionaries take up this text, they are so uncomfortable with the story that they cannot allow it to stand alone. So they include the call of Matthew with it, maybe the blind *men* healed afterwards. A little sleight of hand, follow this one so over here you don't see the woman fading from view. We are uncomfortable with their stories because they remind us how tenuous life is—how easy it is to fall from self-sufficiency to needing help—and yet it is that very shift that can remind us of God's deep love for the poor and our call to live in solidarity with one another.

So many of us are so ashamed when we are need, we try to quietly handle our needs out of sight. That is what is happening in the center story of the gospel. This woman whose bleeding could have had any number of explanations, including many not related to her sex, not necessarily bleed related to menses... this woman tried to handle her problem out of view. I'll just sneak up in the crowd, touch the edge of his robe, be healed, and then fade away into the crowd. One time, I was sitting in a coffee shop, the orange backpack I'd carried every day from my freshman year of high school until I graduated from seminary slung over the back of the chair. I felt the slightest bump against my back, and

turned slightly to issue an apology—probably a sarcastic one—for my orange backpack being in someone’s way, but as I turned, I noticed out of the side of my eye a hand... in my orange backpack! Truly, before my brain even registered what was happening, I was holding onto the wrist attached to the hand that was in my orange backpack. I was looking into the eyes of someone who was trying to take my wallet. I was so surprised by the whole thing—the foiled robbery, sure—but really that my entire body reacted without my knowledge. I just dropped the man’s hand and he just dropped my wallet and ran out the door. I almost imagine Jesus like that, turning slightly, catching sight of the hand that held his clothes. Looking into her eyes and registering in an instance everything that his body had already known. But unlike me, he looks with compassion. And then he calls her “daughter.”

And, in all may years of reading this text—and Mark has it, too, and Luke—I’ve always read that as full of endearment. Like my dad saying it to me, “Daughter.” But if you look at the details a little bit more, Jesus is, what, 30 years old? And this woman has to be at least in her 20s, maybe even older, maybe even a lot older. Maybe she’s menopausal, and maybe that’s why she’s bleeding? And this whippersnapper turns around and calls her “daughter.” And this week, that just crushed me. Jesus is on his way to touch a dead girl, so we see him willing to take risks and cross boundaries, but he won’t treat a woman with any sort of egalitarian respect?

I think I missed this detail—we miss this—very easily because it is an easy thing to treat people who need help—any kind of help—like children. When we were dealing with NICU bills, we applied for short term disability, which paid us a small stipend for each hospital day. To get approved, I had to talk to *Mrs. So-and-so* at the Social Security Office. She was very insistent that she be *Mrs. So-and-so*, while I was *Adrienne, honey, and sweetie*. Of course, when I was all of 18 years old and working at the hospital in my home town as a nurse’s aide, I am embarrassed to say I didn’t take the time to learn my patients’ names, and used similarly saccharine pet names for octogenarians. People with disabilities and people experiencing homelessness and older adults in care homes have countless stories of baby-talk, of decisions made without their consent, of being belittled and demeaned.

And Jesus calls her *daughter*.

But she is not the only woman in this passage. Jesus’s help is sought for a leader’s daughter. To be a daughter in the ancient world on the one hand, is to be required to submit to the authority of first your father, then your husband. But, on the other hand, and, admittedly, ideally, to be a daughter is to be under someone’s care. To be a daughter is to have your father, frantic with grief, try everything to save you, even seeking out the help of an itinerant healer. A healer who might not even come lest he be counted unclean, but he does, and she lives. The precious girl—that’s what the Greek says—the precious girl lives.

The precious girls live. Both of them.

Because, while the woman with the hemorrhage doesn't have a father to frantically seek a cure... While she is only a woman, easily silenced, easily pushed to the side... When Jesus turns to look at her, he calls her daughter—Bold Daughter, no less. He is taking her under his care and keeping. He looks lovingly upon her.

And I still have mixed feelings about this. Because I really want to be in control in my life. I want to make the plans. I want to believe that what separates me from anyone desperately seeking help is how I control my own life, the plans I make, the way I worry things into never coming to pass. To relinquish control of my life to God is to admit that any security I have is mostly luck or fate or the sheer goodwill of others. That I have had good health—or access to healthcare, safe drinking water, the blessing of my government to exist and to live wherever I please. And I have the color of my skin, and the income of my family, and the country where I live.

And this God that we are supposed to depend on is shown to us most clearly in his willingness to be touched by people who are gross—bleeding, dead of unknown causes. This God that we are supposed to depend on is shown most clearly to us by dying on a cross between two criminals. This God we are supposed to depend on shows preference for the poor and outcast and is, herself, poor and outcast.

To relinquish control of my life to God is to admit my own poverty—how poor I am in goodwill for others, how I have substituted having things for having relationships, how I have hoarded power and resources, and bought into a mindset of scarcity. To relinquish control of my life to God will be to stop hiding my failures, my sicknesses, my debt. To relinquish control to God will be to admit all the ways I have allowed *myself* to be carelessly indifferent to the needs of others and to my need *for* others.

Last week the Rev. Sarah McKenny from Stone Belt Arc, a national organization that supports people with all kinds of disabilities and abilities, presented to us a wheel of belonging, the cycle necessary for people—any people—to belong. And near the top, near the completion of the wheel, just before *loved* is *needed*. So often we think that caring for others is enough, but that lacks the mutuality necessary to feel like you belong. To be loved fully, you must first be needed. This is the life we are made for and called to: to need one another.

In our relationship with Iglesia de Santo Domingo de Guzman, we try to stand in solidarity with the people of Chichipate. People who have been despised, neglected, and abused by their own government. Whose young people are leaving their community in hopes of a more secure life. We stand beside the people of Chichipate because they are the beloved of God. We stand beside the people of Chichipate because they stand beside us, in our poverty of goodwill, our fears and shortcomings, our willing indifference and ignorance. Together we seek healing and security, to touch the hem of Jesus's robe, and when we

reach for it, God turns and calls us bold, beloved, precious children. And takes us under God's wing, into God's care and keeping where together will all needed in the kin-dom of God.

Amen.