

I Desire Mercy, Not Sacrifice

June 8, 2008 | Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Fourth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 5) Year A

Lectionary citations

Gen 12:1-9

Ps 33:1-12

Rom 4:13-25

Matt 9:9-13, 18-26

When I read today's Gospel, especially the section usually title, "Jesus raises a dead girls and heals a sick woman," I was intrigued. The story seemed familiar, but many of the details were strangely different or missing. It took me a while to realize that I had recently read the same story in Mark, which has a longer, more detailed version of the same events.

Today's Gospel reading is from the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew, along with Mark and Luke are the Synoptic Gospels. Synoptic means, "Seeing together." These three Gospels agree extensively in language, events, and order. Although scholars disagree, it is commonly believed that Mark was written first, followed by Matthew a decade or so later, and then Luke 5 to 10 years after Matthew.

Matthew is the first Gospel in the Bible. It is beautifully written and well organized. It begins with the Genealogy of Jesus and ends with the risen Christ delivering the great commission. Many of our favorite stories, parables, and sayings of Jesus are found in Matthew. Matthew was traditionally believed to have been written in the Middle East and was directed at Greek speaking Jews with a good knowledge of the Old Testament.

Mark is a quite different Gospel. Mark has no Christmas story. Mark lacks any stories or sayings of the risen Christ, ending abruptly at the empty tomb. Traditionally, Mark was written in Rome for a Gentile audience and was based on the testimony and preaching of Peter. Mark is simply written and moves quickly from incident to incident in Jesus' ministry.

Although there is no consensus, it seems that most scholars agree that Matthew and Luke used Mark to help organize their Gospels. Statistically, 91 percent of Mark's Gospel is contained in Matthew. Because Matthew seems to incorporate almost all of Mark, is more attractively written, and comes first in the Bible, Matthew overshadows Mark in our lectionary, preaching, and Bible study.

However, I would argue that today's Gospel reading demonstrates that Mark sometimes give the most complete and meaningful version of an event in Jesus' life. I would like to give a somewhat different kind of sermon today, by comparing Matthew and Mark's version of today's Gospel.

Not surprisingly, the first difference is that Mark leaves out the story of "The Calling of Matthew," although Mark does include Matthew among the 12 apostles. Matthew is the only Gospel, where Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Score one for Matthew.

***Matthew:** While he was saying this, a synagogue leader came and knelt before him and said, "My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live." Jesus got up and went with him, and so did his disciples.*

***Mark:** Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please*

come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." So Jesus went with him.

Against our expectations, the Mark account is much more detailed and vivid. The name of the father is given, and instead of "kneeling," he "fell at his feet." Moreover, the most significant and fascinating difference between the two is that in Matthew, the daughter has "just died," while in Mark, "my little daughter is dying." In neither Gospel has Jesus yet performed a miracle of raising the dead. Jesus has already performed several miracles of healing in both Gospels. Mark's portrayal of the father coming for healing of a dying girl seems more probable than Matthew's father believing that Jesus could raise the dead.

***Matthew:** Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed." Jesus turned and saw her. "Take heart, daughter," he said, "your faith has healed you." And the woman was healed from that moment.*

***Mark:** A large crowd followed and pressed around him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering. At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?" "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'" "But Jesus kept looking*

around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

The differences between Matthew and Mark in this story are almost too many to list. Again, Mark provides a much more detailed and vivid picture of the woman and her illness. More importantly, the order of events is quite different. In Matthew, the woman touches the cloak, Jesus sees her and speaks to her, and heals her. In Mark, the woman touches his cloak, is healed, Jesus looks for her, she comes to him and confesses, and then Jesus sees her and speaks to her.

Matthew seems to skip over the central drama of the story. One of the key features of the story is that this woman is ritually unclean by her illness and should not even be in a public place, much less touching even the hem of Jesus' garment. While both Gospels include the woman saying to her self, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed," it is only in Mark that this simple faithful touch brings healing. Mark uses the story to demonstrate Jesus' unique nature, that he was so full of the power of God, that this faithful woman could be healed by touching his garment, without Jesus even knowing whom he had healed, but knowing that he had healed someone. Matthew skips all the drama of Jesus "feeling the power going out from him," questioning the crowd, the disciples uncomprehending response, and the woman's brave confession. Again, Mark seems to "get it" while Matthew misses the heart of the story.

***Matthew:** When Jesus entered the synagogue leader's house and saw the noisy crowd and people playing pipes, he said, "Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep." But*

they laughed at him. After the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up. News of this spread through all that region.

***Mark:** While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher any more?" Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, "Don't be afraid; just believe." He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him. After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum!" (which means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"). Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.*

Again, the richness of detail and incident in Mark is amazing. As noted above, Mark makes it clear that the people accepted that Jesus could heal, but not that he could raise the dead, which seems much more logical and realistic, especially at this point in Jesus' ministry. Mark includes the beautiful saying, "Don't be afraid; just believe," and tells us which of the disciples went with Jesus to witness the miracle. We are then given Jesus speaking in Aramaic, his native language, and the detail that the girl was 12 years old. We also have her being given something to eat, which became an important feature of resurrection stories, designed to show that the person raised was not a spirit or ghost.

Then, an important theological difference between Matthew and Mark is highlighted: Matthew, “News of this spread through all that region,” versus Mark, “He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this.” Again, Mark’s account seems more plausible—Jesus was not yet ready for the people and authorities to know that he had the power to raise the dead.

I obviously prefer Mark’s version of this story to that in Matthew. For me, Mark’s story has more truth in it. However, there are plenty of other cases where Mark does not include stories, sayings, and parables found in Matthew that are obviously and vividly the truth about Jesus. It is cases like this that bring home how blessed we are by having all four Gospels. The Gospels play off each other, illustrate each other, contradict each other, illuminate each other, and fill in each other’s omissions. Only by reading and studying all four of them can we have a full picture of Jesus’ words and actions.

When there are significant differences between the Gospels, I try to look for hints about the reasons for those differences. My overall impression is that Matthew treats these two central miracles of Jesus, the healing of the bleeding woman and the raising of the dead girl, too casually. It is almost as if he is skipping over them as quickly as possible out of embarrassment. The embarrassment is Jesus’ contact with the unclean bodies of women—in this case, a woman with what we would call a “gynecological disorder,” and the body of a dead girl. A Pharisee or priest would not touch these females with the proverbial “ten foot pole.” This is what Leviticus 15 says of this woman, “When a woman has a discharge of blood for many days at a time other than her monthly period or has a discharge that continues beyond her period, she will be unclean as long as she has the discharge, just as in the days of her period. Any bed she lies on while her

discharge continues will be unclean, as is her bed during her monthly period, and anything she sits on will be unclean, as during her period. Whoever touches them will be unclean; he must wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he will be unclean till evening.” Numbers 19 tells about how touching a dead body makes someone unclean, “Whoever touches the dead body of anyone will be unclean for seven days. He must purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then he will be clean. But if he does not purify himself on the third and seventh days, he will not be clean.”

Jesus appears to have no interest in or concern for these Old Testament Laws. For the Jews, the question was, “how can he be holy if he touches the unclean.” Mark helps us to see that touching the unclean was the heart of Jesus’ holiness. The Jews believed that ritual and sacrifice made things holy, a belief that we sometimes share today. Jesus saw things quite differently. For Jesus, faith in God was more important than whether someone was clean or unclean. For Jesus, showing mercy was more important than any ritual or sacrifice. In Matthew (not Mark), Jesus quoted the word of the God in Hosea 6, “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.” Amen.

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