

Who's Worthy of Grace?
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Immediately the girl got up and began to walk about. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat. Amen.

As I was reading and rereading and rereading again this morning's Gospel passage, (one that centers around children) I couldn't help but recall the numerous images and arguments I've seen and heard over these last few weeks, which also center around children. I've seen more images of cages full of children—some as young as toddlers—than ever I would have thought to have seen in the year 2018. And, I've heard just as many—if not more—arguments about why these children should or should not be treated the way they are currently being treated. What I've noticed is that the arguments tend to boil down to a question of whether or not someone is worthy of being treated with kindness, dignity, and grace.

It's a question I've heard, one way or another, many times over these last few weeks and I imagine that this question would have been asked by many of the people who witnessed the events in today's Gospel passage. To best understand this passage, it's important to recap what's been omitted between last Sunday's Gospel reading and this morning's.

Last week we heard of Jesus and his disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee, when—after being woken by his panicking disciples—Jesus performs a deed full of wonder as he calms a great storm. Upon reaching the other side, he continued to perform more miracles, and news of these miracles traveled fast throughout Galilee. Jesus and his miraculous deeds started to become rather famous, so much so that when he and his disciples returned to the bank of the Sea they had previously left, a huge crowd was waiting to meet him: hoping to be healed by, or simply to catch a glimpse of this mysteriously powerful man.

But one person stood out particularly in this crowd: a man who would have likely encountered Jesus before, or at least heard of him considering the traveling news since his last visit. A man named Jairus ran up to Jesus, fell at his feet, and desperately begged him over and

over to come and heal his twelve-year-old daughter who was deathly ill with little time remaining.

Mark tells us that Jairus was a synagogue leader: part of the religious establishment, of good standing in the community, a dramatically strict adherent to the laws of the Covenant between God and Israel. Jairus likely represented much of what Jesus' message railed against. The disciples would almost surely know this and must have wondered whether their Lord would come to the aid of this man: whether Jairus was worthy of Jesus' grace. I've often wondered if Jairus too was mindful of this dichotomy between what he had dedicated his life to uphold and the Gospel of the man he was now begging to heal his daughter. I wonder if he shared the disciples' same question. Was he worthy to receive Jesus' grace? I cannot even imagine the surprise to all when Jesus immediately left to follow Jairus, resolved to heal the child.

Neither can I imagine everyone's surprise when—in the middle of a mad rush to save a dying girl—Jesus abruptly turned around and said, “Who touched my clothes?” If you—like me—have spent any time at Summerfest these last few days, you know exactly what the disciples meant when they answered, “...how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” But Christ knew more than just that he had been touched; Mark tells us he knew that power had gone forth from him. Mark also tells us the story of the woman who was healed by Jesus' power.

We don't know her name, but we know her tragic situation. For reasons unknown to us, she had been hemorrhaging blood for twelve years. To hemorrhage blood was to be considered unclean and during the Second Temple Period in the land of Israel, purity laws were so dramatically observed that to be unclean was to be outcasted from society. This woman was hemorrhaging blood for twelve years. She was unclean for twelve years. And on top of her affliction, she had spent every piece of money she had on doctors and healing-ointments: all unsuccessful. She was unclean and absolutely broke. Her society certainly believed she was unworthy of membership, and—if she didn't already believe it herself—that she was unworthy of delaying the healing of Jairus' daughter.

I wonder if Jairus, a man who would have upheld these strict purity laws, believed this outcasted woman was unworthy of delaying Jesus, or even possibly of stealing the healing power which should have rightfully been used on his daughter. Perhaps even the disciples—who had now begun to hear Christ's message—wondered whether this woman was truly worthy of delaying Christ from healing the girl. Nevertheless, she was healed immediately and after

honestly relaying her story to Jesus and the crowd, Christ answered, “Daughter, your faith has made you well...”

This is the one and only person in our Gospels whom Jesus called his daughter. Not daughter of Abraham, not daughter of Jerusalem: he simply calls her his daughter. This woman, who society has outcasted because of her own suffering—for twelve years—is not only healed but is now reconciled to her community and into the family of God. Questions of cleanliness and worthiness evaporate. Because of her courageous faith, she received Christ’s grace and is healed.

No sooner had this miracle occurred than news of a tragedy was delivered. Jairus’ daughter, the girl Jesus was on his way to heal, was dead. Whatever joy was shared at this woman’s healing and hope that the same would now be done for the little girl was now gone. Even after Jesus insisted that they have faith and continue to believe in him, Jairus and his family were weeping: mourning the loss of their daughter. Despite their sorrow, despite their unbelief, Jesus walked right into the room where the girl lay dead, took her by the hand and commanded, “Little girl, get up!” “And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about... He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.”

Regardless of stature in society, cleanliness, uncleanliness, belief, unbelief, faith or lack thereof: Christ offered his healing grace to both the hemorrhaging woman and Jairus’ daughter just as he has given us his healing and saving grace despite our own statures in society, our own cleanliness or uncleanliness, our own belief or unbelief, our own faith of whatever strength.

Honestly, I really don’t know who deserves or is worthy of Christ’s grace, but I truly believe our worth has absolutely nothing to do with it. It’s irrelevant. Christ’s grace is lovingly given for everyone, absolutely everyone. And, just as we love one another as Christ loved us, so should we extend grace just as freely as Christ has extended his own. So, if we encounter questions about whether a human being should be treated with respect to their dignity, whether a child should be extended grace, may we remember how Christ healed the woman he called his child and how he responded in grace to Jairus’ child: by raising her to new life—reuniting her to her father and family—and having her brought something to eat. Amen.