

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8) – Year B – June 28, 2009
2 Samuel 1: 1, 17-27; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43
Susan E. Wilmot

There's an old proverb that says, "You can't judge a book by its cover." Yet in all honesty, that is precisely what we all do. At one level, we have prejudices and preferences that lead us to make judgments about others based on appearances. It's not always justified, but it is human. Such judgments are shaped by our experiences, as well as our personal 'safe operating zones'. At another level, most of us would know immediately whether we wanted to buy this paperback. The cover has on it a twenty-something, tall, dark stranger whose arms are sweeping around an equally young and attractive wild-haired beauty. The marketers of bodice-ripping romance novels know exactly what kind of cover identifies the content of the book, and so do the avid readers.

Now think about today's Gospel reading. If you had to put a cover onto the stories that Mark gives us what would it look like? Would you have Jesus as the central figure, or the bedside scene at Jairus' house? Maybe your cover would focus on the bleeding woman wrapped anonymously in her shabby dark colored robe stealthily weaving her way towards Jesus through the crowd, her eyes flashing with equal amounts of fear and anticipation. These are awesome stories of Jesus' powerful healing presence. They are also stories of real people, like you and me: some of us well off or imbued with cultural authority, and some of us much less so. Yet, almost all of us will find ourselves praying to God for a miracle, at least at some time in our lives or the lives of our loved ones.

The story begins with Jesus making yet another crossing. He is returning with His disciples from the gentile territory of the Gerasenes – a boundary-breaking trip for a Jewish rabbi. In this portion of Mark's Gospel, Jesus' divine power and authority are being affirmed repeatedly. Not just by the deeds of power that he accomplishes, but in the deference and faith shown towards him by a wide variety of characters. Today's story sees the powerful leader of the synagogue falling at Jesus' feet begging him to lay His hands on his ailing daughter. We also have the most marginalized and poorest member of that society: an unclean woman, who seeks Jesus out with complete faith that He can heal her, even though all human treatments have failed. Given the hard-won equality of rights for women in our own society, it might be easy for us to miss the fact that Jesus is first of all called to address the needs of a dying little girl; and then interrupts His mission of mercy to heal another woman of her disease. In a time, place and culture where women and children were essentially considered nothing more than property, the fact that Jesus takes time to touch both of these women is remarkable. If we had chosen to show Jesus touching a dead girl; or even the bleeding woman in the crowd on the cover of this book, not one person of Jesus' day would have picked it up, let alone bought it!

Jesus crosses yet another boundary in these stories: that of the purity laws that the Pharisees and other religious leaders held in such high regard for obedient living. Both the woman and the little girl are unclean, one because of her issue of blood, and the other because she is already dead when Jesus finally reaches out to her. Spiritually, Jesus' authority knows no bounds. Later He will be murdered because He breaks the human-made laws that allow power to rest in a select few and are so exclusive and damaging to His own people. Even before Jesus pays the ultimate price for His own obedience to God's will, he breaks the bonds of death by restoring life to Jairus' daughter. The resurrection of our Lord Jesus is God's final Word on sin and death. It is also the vindication of Jesus as God's Son affirming His way of life, His teaching and giving us all the hope of eternal life.

What is ritual impurity when the life, well-being and wholeness of the innocent and the marginalized are at stake? In both healings described for us in Mark, Jesus shows how we must all use God's power and authority to transcend petty legalism in order to restore others to the fullness of abundant life. For the twelve year-old girl, Jesus raises her from the dead with his touch and gentle word, restoring her to all the life-giving potential of any young girl on the cusp of womanhood. For the woman who has been bleeding for as long as this little girl has lived, there is another miracle of reconciliation.

Being ritually unclean meant that the woman was forbidden to touch others, especially men, leaving her a virtual pariah, isolated from family, friends and community. We are also told that she has spent everything she had seeking a cure for her disease, but to no avail. That means she is not only exiled from her only support network, but is one of the poorest of the poor.

Jesus' power heals her body, as she knows immediately after she touches His cloak, and as Jesus is also aware. But that is not enough for Him. He stops to make time for her, to connect with her face-to-face. "Who touched my clothes?" he asks, and she comes forward in fear and trembling. The woman tells her story as Jesus listens. He addresses her as a daughter of Israel, affirms that her faith has made her well. Then Jesus says, "Go in peace, and be healed of your disease." Jesus' response to the woman is amazing – no Jewish man of that day would have had a public conversation with a strange woman. Everything that is shared in these stories is significant. Jesus has felt the woman's touch, reached out to hear her story, and now blesses her in *shalom*. That is a blessing of God's peace, good health, and wholeness in body, mind and spirit. Being healed of her disease is more than just the physical cessation of her bleeding; it is salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Your healing and mine is also our salvation through faith in Jesus, our Lord and Savior. By her physical healing, the woman who is now named as Daughter of God, may also be restored to community. She is no longer unclean. Her faith, her salvation, her healing is the wholeness and abundance of life that God desires for each of us in the community of faith.

When you and I reach out to touch Jesus, we too are taking the time to deepen our relationship with the Lord and giver of all Life. There are still miracles of physical healing today. I have heard several firsthand accounts of tumors that have literally disappeared overnight apparently through the power of prayer in Jesus' name. As marvelous as this is, it does not answer our question of why some are healed when we pray, and why others die. All we know is that healing comes in many ways, including complete physical healing. Courage and God's peace, in the face of pain or terminal illness is also God's blessed healing at work. Acceptance is a form of healing. Healing may also come to us as freedom from the fear of a disease. In the mystery that is God, we must acknowledge that sometimes our perfect healing is only effected in our new and unending life with Christ. For many, release from our earthly bodies is the greatest gift of healing. God's assurance is that in our salvation through faith in Christ, we will all be healed.

It appears that by taking the time to establish a relationship with the woman, Jesus has lost the opportunity to heal Jairus' daughter. News comes that she is dead, but Jesus is entirely unperturbed. It is no accident that he took the time to put the marginalized woman ahead of the synagogue leader's request. As always in God's kingdom there is a reversal from the worldly order of things. His disciples are irritated that He stops to address the needs of such an insignificant woman. In their minds, they are likely thinking it is a real coup to be in the favor of the synagogue leader. But they have, as usual, got it all wrong. Rather than dismiss the bleeding woman in order to impress Jairus, as His disciples would have done, Jesus takes the time to heal, bless and restore the dignity of the most powerless first. Once again, Jesus has put society's outcasts first and foremost, and made the building and restoration of relationship the focus of His ministry of healing. We truly can't judge any book by its cover. Whether we are effectively worn and raggedy, or crisp and new, our lives are a storybook, a page out of the ongoing history of salvation, the greatest story ever told. There's no doubt that we're all very busy people. Yet, despite the busy-ness of our lives, will you and I do what Jesus did? Will we set aside our judgments and give the gift of healing as we take time to listen, reach out, or respond to another's touch?

Amen.