

When I was 8 years old, I was caught in a rip tide and my brother saved my life. It was the summer of 1996, and my family was at our annual beach week at Emerald Isle, on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. It's always a gamble to go to the beach in the south during hurricane season. That year there was a tropical storm building but it was pretty far away and didn't seem to pose an imminent threat. Even so, my mother warned us about the danger of rip tides. "If you get caught in one," she said, "don't swim against it. Just let it take you out, swim to the side, and then you can come back in."

Sure enough, one afternoon I was out swimming and realized I was being pulled farther and farther away from the shore. I knew not to swim against the current but just keeping my head above the water was hard enough, let alone swimming to the side and getting back in. So I started waving and shouting for my family on the beach. After what seemed like forever but was probably just seconds, my mom saw me and said to my brother who was next to her, "Go save your brother." Without hesitating, Chris, age 13 at the time, grabbed his boogie board and raced out to rescue me. Eventually, we made it back to shore and I can say with certainty that I would not be here if he hadn't saved my life that day. To say thank you, my parents and I got him a customized t-shirt from one of those beach shops that said "I saved a life at Emerald Isle."

Today we find Jesus with his own seaside healing story. In our gospel today, Jesus is coming back from where he was headed last week when he calmed the storm. On the other side of the sea of Galilee he healed the

demoniac and now, upon his return, the crowds are here to see what he will do next. This time, it's Jairus, a leader of the synagogue whose daughter is dying, who asks Jesus to intervene and save her life. But on the way to his house, as we heard, Jesus has an encounter with an unnamed woman who is also in need of his saving power.

It is no coincidence that these two stories are interwoven. When this type of thing happens in scripture, it is important to see the signal that the author is sending. These two stories are put side by side so that they can interpret one another. The similarities and differences, the nuances and subtleties we find, make these two healing stories that much more powerful and rich. I'd like to a closer look at those, so it might help if you have the reading handy.

The most noticeable difference to me is the gulf in status between the two seekers. The first is a man, whose name is given, and as a lay leader of the synagogue, is a well-respected member of society. His daughter is dying and his prominence has surely contributed to the size and interest of the crowd. Will Jesus, this controversial prophet heed the request of this leader of the establishment with which he so often butts heads? The contrast of this upstanding citizen is stark when paired with the second person on the scene--a woman, who is not named, who had money but has had to spend it all on "healthcare" that didn't work. She is worse off than before and that same religious establishment has ostracized her from the community for twelve years because of her disease. Now, on the way to heal this important

man's daughter, what will Jesus do with this unexpected encounter with an untouchable woman?

Well, we see what he does--he has compassion for Jairus *and* for the woman. Yes, Jairus is a father whose daughter is dying and would do anything to help her. But for a leader of the synagogue to publicly request help from the infamous Jesus? That took guts. And it took faith. The same is true for the woman. She had been scorned for twelve years, as long as Jairus's daughter had been alive, and it took guts and it took faith to push through the crowd to get to Jesus. Both of them crossed social boundaries in order to benefit from Jesus' healing power and Jesus honored their guts and faith.

Another difference between the two encounters is the method and the direction of the healings themselves. Jairus approaches Jesus in public and asks him to "come and lay [his] hands on her, so that she may be made well." But the woman has to come up from behind Jesus, believing that "if I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Jairus is direct. The woman has to be secretive. However, what begins as a public request from Jairus, ends in a private healing for his "little girl" as Jesus only allows a choice few to be in the room with him, and even those people he commands not to tell anyone. And what begins as a secret touching of Jesus' clothes, ends in a public blessing for this unnamed but faithful woman, whom he calls a daughter.

Note the public vs. the private. Jesus knows that the crowds are there because they've heard he's a miracle-worker. They're there to see the next magic trick. It doesn't stop him from raising this little girl from the dead, but

he knows that doing so in public, will only add to his reputation as a magician, and therefore only attract superficial and conditional followers. This is illustrated by the fact that when word arrives that the girl has died, those messengers tell Jairus not to trouble Jesus anymore. To this Jesus says, “Do not fear, only believe.” which is *exactly* what they just witnessed with the healing of the unnamed woman. She was not afraid and she had faith. And *that*, Jesus says to the crowd, is what made her well.

And that gets us to what is the same in these two stories. That phrase “be made well” is in both parts. The Greek word behind “be made well” is σωζω, which means “be made well” but it also means “saved.” But σωζω isn’t just like getting over a cold. It means to rescue from suffering, from disease, and even from death. In fact, the last times Mark uses σωζω in his gospel is when Jesus himself is suffering on the Cross and passers by yell, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save (σωζω) yourself, and come down from the cross!’ And the chief priests and scribes, those religious authorities, also mock him saying, “He saved (σωζω) others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.’” From the beginning of Mark, through our reading today, and to the end, there’s this tension of why people come to Jesus. Do they come because they want to be entertained or do they come because they know they need help and that only Jesus has the power to save.

Jairus and the woman came because they had heard he had saved others and they believed he could save them. These two savings are the culmination

of four miracle stories that Mark uses to illustrate Jesus' saving power--his power over nature in the calming of the sea, over evil spirits in the exorcism of the demoniac, over sickness and disease in the healing of the woman, and finally over death in the raising of the little girl. You'd think that these events would lead to a full-scale revival on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, but instead, it culminates in Jesus being rejected in his hometown of Nazareth that same week. Mark underscores this rejection by adding, "And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief." Even as he's being rejected, he *still* heals some folks and the people *still* don't believe.

Belief. Faith. Trust. That's what matters if we want to follow Jesus. Jesus has the healing power but it takes faith for us to stay connected to it in order to be saved and to live into the freedom and joy of eternal life in Christ. What is faith? Having faith in Jesus means letting go of our trust in things that are not Jesus. Things like: our money, our unhealthy habits, ourselves, our friends or family, our institutions, our shame, our fear. Whatever is keeping you from trusting Jesus fully, you've got to let it go. You've got to take it off or else it'll trip you up later on.

And that's the piece of the riptide story I didn't share with you. When my brother got to me out there in the water, he took the strap of the boogie board and put it on *my* leg. He risked his own safety to ensure mine. But then, when I got to the shore and tried to run up the sand, that strap was still on me and I tripped. I still can't believe it but I got mad at my brother because I fell down. I was back safely, my life preserved by his heroic action, but this strap,

which was there to ensure my safety, made me stumble and made me mad. But reflecting on it now, I see that the real saving came not from the boogie board and the strap but from Chris. The strap was there just in case but it was my brother's love and action that saved me. Once I had been saved, I didn't need that safety net. I had to take it off in order to be truly free.

Clinging to the mechanism of grace keeps you from experiencing the full joy of the grace itself. That's true for the unnamed woman. After she is healed, Jesus tells her to go in peace. Imagine if she clinged to Jesus' robes--neither of them would get very far! That's why we get dismissed at the end of church. Yes, we meet Jesus at here at church--in the eucharist and in one another. But if we just stay here, what good is that? We are to go forth into the world rejoicing in the power of Spirit, taking that spirit of freedom and salvation with us and sharing it with everyone we meet whoever they are, just as they are because that is how God loves and accepts us. The church keeps us afloat and we shouldn't do away with it, but once we have been saved (and then saved again, and again, and again, week by week, day by day) we go back out into the world sharing that life-giving love.

So, don't be afraid, have faith, and when you leave today, don't forget to take off the strap.

Amen.