

2021-06-27 – Rev Esmā Collins-Marks

Mark 5: 21-43

“He strictly ordered them that no one should know this....” What a peculiar way to end a miracle. After all, this is the sort of thing everybody was looking for; this is the sort of thing that would be great press; and it was the sort of thing that would really make his reputation.

But Jesus didn't say, “go tell everybody in town”. He didn't say, “If anybody has any questions about what I can do, give them Jairus' address.” He didn't say anything like that at all. Instead, “He ordered them that no one should know this. Odd isn't it.

On the other hand, this is a really difficult story to deal with, and that peculiar command by Jesus really is the key to making sense of it. Remember, the most important part of this story is not that it is historical. That is, the main point is not that Jesus was a nice guy who could do neat tricks way back then. If the Gospel is to be God's word to us, it has to say something about us and about today, about today's reality, and today's needs.

The miracles of Jesus are not just isolated displays of power. Jesus didn't do them just because he could; he didn't call the disciples together and say, “hey, guys, look at this one” — and poof! something impossible happens. Instead, Jesus' miracles are an integrated, coherent part of his ministry — of his teaching and preaching and bringing the Kingdom of God. They are perhaps best understood as acted-out parables, living sermon illustrations. They are all ways of saying something important about Jesus and about the Kingdom of God.

On that level, the raising of Jairus' daughter is one of the ways that Mark's Gospel proclaims that God's power is greater even than the power of death, and that Jesus has authority over both life and death. Where Jesus is, death is conquered. That's the general point. But what does it mean? What does that authority over death look like, and how do we experience that power today?

One thing it could mean, and one thing it has been treated as meaning, is that this story is a model for the way life works now. That is, if you have enough faith (whatever that means), faith like that of Jairus, then your child will not die, or you will not die, or others you love and care about will not die (or will not stay dead), or at least they won't do that right now, and not for a long time. I have more than once heard preachers say that this is what the story means. This story, and others like it, have been used as ways of saying that life is really a type of contest, where everything depends on you, on whether you have enough faith, or the right sort of faith, to win the prize of Jesus doing something good for you and yours.

That is an attractive reading for a lot of reasons. First of all, it appeals to that desire we all have for answers, for having everything in our world and our lives make sense. Second, this interpretation feeds a hungry but immature sense of possessing unlimited power we all carry around from our childhood: the idea that whatever happens, happens somehow because of me — and if I had only done something different, if I had only had more faith, then whatever happened would not have happened. There is great and compelling egocentricity in that. Finally, (and again) this just seems to be what the story says, if you take it all by itself, if you just look at what happened that day.

But for all of its attractiveness, this is not what the raising of Jairus' daughter is all about. The story does not promise that if you have enough faith, your daughter will not die. It is not about God weighing your faith, or your goodness, against the possibility of bad events and deciding whether you, or somebody else, "gets it" or not. It is not about that at all.

This is where the business of keeping it quiet, of ordering people to tell no one what had happened, becomes central. The reason Jesus does that is to make it clear that the meaning, the true significance, of the event could not be known or understood at the time it happened. The obvious

interpretation would be wrong. What happened with Jairus' daughter could only be understood later, when all was accomplished. It could only be known in the light of the cross and the resurrection. That is, the real meaning of the Lord's authority over death is not that Jesus could do miracles, (that was just an illustration, a parable) and it is not that, with enough faith, we can somehow escape the worst of life (which is nonsense.). The real meaning of the Lord's authority over death is found in the resurrection. Neither Jairus nor anyone else who was there could have known that. So anything they said would be misleading. Anything they said would give the wrong idea (just like some other preachers do).

The crucifixion and resurrection show what it looks like, really, for then and for now and for always, for Jesus to be greater than death. Jesus was not spared suffering and death. He was not resuscitated to live a little longer and then die again. Our hope isn't about any of those things. Instead, through the resurrection, God made something new. At the resurrection God took the life that Jesus had lived, and God took the death that Jesus died, and transformed them, through God's power, into something new and something better. And in doing that, God revealed great and wonderful meaning and purpose in the life of Jesus, and in all human life.

What God does promise us, and where our hope is to be found, is not freedom from the pain and the loss and the grief and the death that is part of our humanity, any more than it is in freedom from the joy and the pleasure, the passion and the excitement that are also a part of that humanity. Instead of removing these, or protecting us from these, God does two things.

First, God encompasses all of these human experiences: God knows all of them; God lives all of them. By doing this, God sanctifies all of our lives by his experience of them, and God joins us in our humanity. We are not alone, and we matter. God shares our life.

That's one thing. The other is that God promises us resurrection, a resurrection like that of Jesus. This means that, finally, nothing will be lost. God will make something new and renewed of our lives and of our

deaths, and of the lives and the deaths of every one for whom he died. God promises that there is both meaning and hope in each of our lives and in each of our deaths. God promises that God's word of love will be the strongest word, and the best word, and the last word. God promises us that God will make all creation new, and that we will be a part of that.

The story of Jairus' daughter is a sort of parable of this — it points toward this. But it didn't make sense all by itself. It wasn't clear at the time. So the Gospel writer is careful to say that Jesus strictly ordered that no one should know. Until later, until by the resurrection we have the light we need to see what is really going on, and to find in that meaning, strength and hope. Amen.