

Interlocking Stories

Raisin and I are back from a week's vacation in Minneapolis. We went there in part to see a revival of *West Side Story* at the Guthrie Theater. The show is Leonard Bernstein's imaginative setting of "Romeo and Juliet" in 1957 Manhattan as conflict between two street gangs. The music is spectacular and the Guthrie a fabulous place to see any production.

While there we spent time with a former colleague from St. Ambrose University. He and his wife retired and moved to Vermont but their daughter lives in Minneapolis. Once they found out we would be there, they bought tickets to the show, too. It was the first time we had seen them in four years.

One of the remarkable things about deep friendships is that no matter how much time elapses between meetings, conversation quickly falls into a normal routine. It's as though separation had only been a matter of days rather than years. As the four of us told stories of what had happened since we last saw one another, our time apart became incorporated into the larger story of our many years together. That's what makes friendship so rewarding.

Today we heard two other kinds of stories interlock with one another. St. Mark loved to incorporate what have been called "sandwich stories" in his Gospel. He starts one and then inserts another before finishing the first. At first glance it seems a bit clumsy, but Mark knew what he was doing.

Mark is subtle, but he closely links the two stories we heard. Both involve females, one a woman who bled for twelve years, one a girl twelve years old. Both are called daughters. Both are healed through touch. And both stories are told with a great deal of urgency.

In the first story, urgency is obvious. A Jewish ruler begs Jesus repeatedly because his daughter is at the point of death. He wants Jesus to make his child well – using a word which also means delivered or saved. In this story, the healing touch of Jesus will save as well as cure. So Jesus goes with the ruler and the crowd follows.

Within the crowd is a woman who has been hemorrhaging off and on for twelve years. The translation obscures the fact that she is described by a string of seven participles. She is suffering, bleeding, enduring, spending, getting worse, hearing about Jesus, coming up behind him – and then, at last, she touched him. It's a breathless description as Mark writes it, increasing expectation and urgency. With that touch, something happens. She knows within herself that she has been healed.

Jesus knows something has happened, too. So he turns around. In the crush of the crowd, many people have touched him, but only one was healed. The woman comes up weeping and kneels before him, confessing what she has done. As a woman with a bleeding discharge she had been an outcast, unclean, contaminating anyone who touched her. Miraculously, Jesus was not contaminated by her touch. Instead, his touch made her clean. To emphasize this new relationship, he calls her "daughter." He brings her back into the community as one beloved of God, recognizing her as one of God's children.

Meanwhile, the ruler's child is still dying. So with the second story completed, the first one resumes. Jesus finally arrives at the ruler's house and finds chaos. When he overhears that the child has died, he objects and says, "Do not fear, only believe." Then out of the commotion and confusion, Jesus creates peace. He sends the wailers outside and takes only the parents and three disciples with him. This time Jesus initiates the touch, taking the girl by the hand and speaking to her in her native language. Immediately she gets up, and we hear the final link between the two stories: she is twelve years of age.

Mark tells us that the parents were overcome with amazement. I'll bet they were! I'm sure they were also overcome with gratitude. We heard a lot about gratitude in St. Paul's message to the church in Corinth. It's a fascinating passage when you consider its context. Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to contribute toward the relief of the church in Jerusalem. Plain and simple, it's a stewardship campaign. In the verses just before, Paul has pointed out how generous the poverty-stricken Macedonians were. Surely the well-to-do Corinthians can do better! He doesn't command them to give. That might backfire. Rather, Paul says that it is a test of their love. He frames it all in the "generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ," who made himself poor (that is, humbled himself) so that we might be rich with God. Our attitude should be one of gratitude.

In Mark's Gospel, physical healing always involves physical touch. Spiritual healing comes through words. This morning you will have the opportunity to experience both. Members of the Order of St. Luke the Physician will offer prayers for healing and anointing with blessed olive oil at the time of communion to those who wish to receive them. This ministry of the Episcopal Church is grounded in biblical stories of healing like those we heard this morning.

Mark had to work to link his stories together. It can also be difficult for us to connect our personal stories with the great stories of faith. That's why it's important to hear Bible stories again and again. Many of you participated in the reading of Luke and Acts during Lent and Easter. This summer, Michelle Crouch has set up daily Bible reading as part of her class on spiritual friendship. I've put the readings and prayers on the church website for those who can't get to the class every week. There's an Episcopal church in Wilmette that provides daily readings throughout the year. We could do that here if there's enough interest here.

Personal friendship and spiritual friendship are both enhanced by stories. They are what bind us together. Our own stories become part of the larger story of Trinity Cathedral, itself linked to the stories of the men and women who, down through the generations, have kept our faith alive. Now it is our turn to carry that faith forward to new generations. People continue to bleed and die just as they did in Jesus' time. They long for the new life that comes through faith in Christ Jesus. How will you be a part of taking the healing presence of Jesus into the world?

[Pentecost 6: 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43.]