

Text: Mark 5: 21-43
Title: Laughing at Jesus
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Roger Allen Nelson

He did what any father would do.

When she was a toddler he loved that moment after her bath when she would be all wrapped up in a towel and crawl up in his lap for a story and she smelled like Eden before the fall.

And, when she played soccer with the boys she was all laughter and limbs and determination. As she ran and scraped and scrambled, he stood on the sidelines with the other parents soaking in the God-given-glory of the moment.

And, when she learned to play the flute it was all squeaks and whistles without any sense of time. She wanted to forget it and play outside; he kept trying to get her to practice; but it was like breaking a frisky colt....

Until finally he'd give in and let her go ~ and the sun would catch her hair as she ran through the door, and her eyes would flash with mischief as over her shoulder she would call "I love you dad." And, it would it take his breath away.

And, when she fell asleep he would come in and kiss her gently on the head ~ so as not to wake her ~ and from the deepest places in his heart he would whisper thanksgiving to God

He did what any father would do.

He worked hard to provide the best garden in which she could grow. He climbed the ladder at the synagogue. He knew some call from God and he wanted to serve faithfully and use his gifts for good, but religious work was also the best way that he knew to make a living,

to provide a home in a safe neighborhood,
to afford the best schools,
to insure a healthy diet,
to have a place for his family where play and curiosity and faith and friendship could flourish.

He did what any father would do.

When she started to loose energy and her eyes dimmed he took her to the doctor right away. He asked all the questions he could think of, but he still laid awake at night wondering and worrying about medicine and what they'd missed and what more he could do. Twelve year old girls were supposed to be bundles of boundless energy, not pallid and knocked down by pain.

So, he carried her to every doctor in the region and he tried every healing alternative. He would move heaven and earth, spend his last dime, and trade

places with her in a heart beat if he could. But, she kept slipping further and further away. He felt lost, impotent, desperate, and from the deepest place in his heart he pleaded and bargained and banged at God's door.

Then one day word spread through the village that Jesus of Nazareth and his band of disciples had returned from the west side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus was an itinerant rabbi and the buzz was that he was powerful in word and deed ~ even healing the sick. So, he did what any father would do ~ he ran to find Jesus.

When Jairus crested the hill just outside of town he could see a crowd gathered by the shore. He wanted to gather his dignity and catch his breath, but on a wave of longing and love he stumbled down the slope and he pushed and pulled and panted and people parted until he was standing before Jesus ~ eye to eye, man to man, breath to breath.

Suddenly another wave broke and he fell at the feet of Jesus. A stunned hush rippled through the crowd; powerful and proud synagogue leaders deferred to no one, but all professional trappings disappeared and from the dust a father begged Jesus:

My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live.

He did what any father would do.

It is the beginning of a story that resonates deeply with us.

It is the interruption to the story that is harder to understand.

As the crowd is bustling and jostling toward Jairus's house a woman who suffered with a hemorrhage for twelve years, sneaks up behind Jesus and touches his cloak. She was a desperate woman; she had done everything she could ~ tried every doctor and spent every dime ~ but her condition kept getting worse not better.

In a culture where religious laws defined community she was an outsider. Her condition pushed her to the fringes. She couldn't participate in the monthly purification rites required of all Jewish women. She couldn't marry, couldn't join others in work or worship, and couldn't live in the community. She was marginalized, ostracized, isolated, alienated, and cast out.

But, listen to how Rosemary Reuther describes her:

Jewish law regarded a woman with a flow of blood as unclean and polluting anyone else she touched. Jesus' reaction to the woman shows his deliberate discarding of the taboo, while the woman's own terror at being discovered in touching his garment reveals her awareness at violating the taboo.

Maybe she was more like Jairus than first glance suggests; from both ends of the social strata two desperate and courageous people crossed over social boundaries in the hope that Jesus could heal.

They offer remarkable distinctions:

Jairus is of substantial standing; the woman is of no account.

Jairus rushes forward; the woman sneaks up from behind.

Jairus is looking for a miracle; the woman is looking for magic.

Jairus is prominent, the woman is poor.

Jairus is advocating for his daughter, the woman is on her own.

Jairus is an insider, the woman is an outsider.

Jairus has a name, the woman is anonymous.

They offer remarkable distinctions and yet for both the doctors don't have a cure, they are down to their last dollar, and they have nowhere else to turn. The longing for healing or for God is no respecter of persons.

And yet, even as they both reach across barriers, Jesus meets them by crossing over boundaries, breaking the rules, and touching the untouchable as he heals the woman and revives the daughter. Thanks be to God.....

But!

But, what hooked this preacher, this time, is the crowd laughing at Jesus when they arrived at the home of Jairus. Jesus is too late. The little girl is dead. She is traveling down the tunnel toward the light. Her heart has stalled and her blood is running cold. So, when Jesus announces that the girl is not dead but asleep, they laugh....

There is something cruel here. In the home of a heart broken and desperate father, in the presence of a woman Jesus called "daughter" as he freed her from her long suffering, people still had the nerve to laugh. They laughed at Jesus.

Maybe it is easy to laugh at Jesus.

He is so naïve, so pie in the sky, so storybook soft, so misty and gauzy around the edges.

In the real world people die.

In the real world children get sick and don't wake up.

In the real world women end up lonely and alone.

In the real world call a doctor; call an undertaker; call in the professionals.

In the real world those who upset the social order get crucified.

So, maybe the laughter was mocking derision. At best Jesus was just one more spiritual nut-bar that offered a misguided kingdom for fools and at worst he was a religious charlatan preying on the hopes and fears of the desperate. Maybe to them it was all a charade.

Or, maybe the laughter was the cynical cackle of pseudo-intellectual hipsters. They simply dismissed and disdained belief because they were sure they were smarter. Rational skepticism always sees one more question and always poses one more problem. They couldn't believe or wouldn't believe because they couldn't shake the questions:

Religion is a product of culture, so who is to say whose religion is right?

Why revive that little girl, what of the countless other fathers with dead daughters?

What quirky coincidences conspired to create this situation?

Simpletons and the silly cling to ancient tales of miracles ~ every culture has similar tall tales ~ why is this any different?

And so they laughed. Jesus was a fool. What did he know?

Dear friends, Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

Every healing, every revival, every banishment of evil is like a hole poked in the opaque fabric of time and space. The kingdom breaks through and for a moment or two we see how things will be ~ or how they really are right now in the mind of God ~ and then it is over. The disciples go back to their rowing, the once blind beggar walks off to look for work, the little girl stretches her arms above her head and takes the bread her stunned mother holds out to her.

What if we see read the story of Jairus and his daughter, the story of the bleeding woman, as punctures in the veil where we get a glimpse of the in-breaking kingdom of God?

They are part of a series of stories that Mark stacks up where Jesus exercises power over the physical world, over the spiritual world, and here, even over death. But, we get here an already glimpse of the not yet. We get a glimpse where the purpose of God in Christ is made clear.

For God in Christ would cross every boundary so that sin ~ and every twisted expression of sin ~ will be defeated and death will have no final hold. And, dads won't bury daughters and women won't be tossed out alone. And this story is an invading and inviting picture of what is in Jesus and what will be in Jesus. It is a picture of a kingdom come and a kingdom coming.

And as that is true, then

no matter how dead you feel,

no matter what death you dying,

no matter where you're bleeding,

the good news is that the very nature of reality is changed.

In Christ the Kingdom has broken in.

Is that too much to hope, too much to trust, too much to live into, too much to fall back onto? For, I suppose we can laugh in derision or we can laugh in joyful hope.

I suppose we can join the crowd chuckling at the door or we can listen for Jesus:

Don't be afraid, just believe...

Amen.