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## “Jesus and the New Social Order.”

Jesus would often say, “The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” But a lot of people didn’t always know what he meant; sometimes, I think we still don’t. But the good news is that, in our gospel reading, Jesus gives us a glimpse of what the Kingdom of Heaven might actually look like.

At first glance, our gospel reading is simply the story of two people being healed by Jesus. And if that’s all we took away from it, it’d still be a good story. But at the same time, we all know that many of the stories about Jesus have layers of meaning that we often miss, because the clues to their existence are often *cultural* clues; things that would be obvious to a first-century audience, but be completely overlooked by a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience. This is what’s going on in our gospel reading, so we need to do some digging.

But before we get started, we need to remember that Mark doesn’t include miracles in his gospel because he wants to portray Jesus as a wonder-worker; I mean, Jesus may *be* that, but it’s

almost beside the point. Rather, Mark includes *certain* miracles because he wants to show us *what sort of messiah* Jesus will be.

So, now we can turn our attention to today's gospel reading, and (1) see what kind of messiah Jesus will be, and (2) see if we can get a better glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven. And we'll do that by exploring the relationships between two pairs of people. First, between the woman who is sick, and the young girl who is dying. And then, between Jesus and the synagogue leader, Jairus.

First, the woman and the young girl.

Right at the outset, Mark links them by virtue of a shared time-frame. The woman has been sick for 12 years, and the young girl who is dying, is 12 years old. But beyond that, they couldn't be any more different.

The woman is a social outcast, because her particular illness has rendered her "ritually unclean." (That's a religious technical term.) The young girl, however, as the daughter of a synagogue leader, has been born into wealth and power, and she wanders the corridors of privilege. So, you get the picture, right?

But as the story unfolds, Mark throws in an ironic twist: The woman is healed *at the very moment* at which the young girl dies.

In other words, the woman, the outsider, gets exactly what she needs, which is a healing, and by which she is *restored* to her family, her community, and her religion. While at the exact same time, the daughter of Jairus, the insider, dies, and is *removed* from her family, her community, and her religion. (And if the phrase, “The first shall be last, and the last shall be first” is running through your mind, there’s a reason for that.)

But Mark also connects those two characters through the title of “daughter.” The young girl, though unnamed in our reading, is identified as the “daughter” of a synagogue leader. And so, when she dies, there are a lot of people who mourn her passing. But the woman has lived a very different life. In fact, for the past 12 years, her life has been a kind of living-death. Because she is “ritually unclean,” there is no one who will care for her; there is no one to mourn her situation. In fact, she is shunned, and can no longer be counted among the “Daughters of Israel”; that is, a woman in good social and moral standing. And yet, by the end of the story, Jesus declares that she has not just been healed, but also restored, when

he says to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace; be healed of your disease.”

So, what’s going on here? Well, this is Mark showing us the sort of messiah Jesus intends to be; which is the sort of messiah that challenges our long-held religious assumptions, and dares to overturns our entrenched cultural norms.

You see, in our story, the outsider (the woman) and the insider (the girl) trade places. The “unclean” woman becomes “clean” after her healing. While the “clean” daughter of Jairus becomes “unclean” by virtue of her death. However, and not to worry, she is made “clean” again when she is restored to life.

In other words, when Jesus enters the scene, the woman and the girl, who previously lived in very different social circles, are brought together to become members of the same circle; a new circle.

This is Jesus waging class warfare, by destroying the usual social barriers between rich and poor, and between insiders and outsiders. *This* is the Kingdom of Heaven, where people who had

no hope are given new hope by Jesus, and where those who had relied on things like wealth, power, and privilege, are given a serious reality check.

And so, that's what's going on in the relationship between the two women. And wasn't I right when I said that there was so much more to this story than two people being healed?

So, now, let's consider the relationship between Jesus and Jairus, the synagogue leader, and see what's going on there. And the first thing I want to note is the fact that, what's at stake in their relationship, isn't the question of who's an insider and who's an outsider; but rather, at stake is the notion of a "life of honor" versus a "life of shame," and what that means for those so labeled.

Honor referred to a person's good standing in Jewish society. Honor brought with it status and entitlement. And as the leader of the synagogue, Jairus had honor. And so, he is able to approach Jesus with his request, because he is *entitled* to do so. And when he falls at Jesus' feet, it's *not* from a sense of unworthiness or desperation, but because that's what the social customs of his day required. So, Jairus approaches Jesus as an equal.

But by contrast, the woman who had been sick for 12 years has no such entitlement. She may *not* approach Jesus; and that's why she has to touch him anonymously and surreptitiously. Because at play here is the question of who may touch whom. And Mark's point is that the woman has been relegated by society to a position of shame, where she is quite literally "untouchable."

So, now we know the social dynamics at play — the cultural clues I mentioned earlier — so let's see how their story unfolds.

Jairus goes to Jesus and asks for a favor — to heal his daughter — and Jesus agrees. Now there is a social contract in place, and Jesus is duty-bound by that social contract to drop everything, and immediately go and do what he has agreed to do.

But what happens next is unexpected and scandalous. Jesus is following Jairus to his home, when Jesus *allows* their journey to be interrupted, and interrupted by an *unclean* woman. Jesus is on the verge of causing a scene, and so the disciples, quite sensibly, try to hurry him on, to cover up the unbelievable social gaffe that Jesus is committing. But Jesus will have none of that. Yes, he is indeed on a mission of healing for a person of high social

standing; but in the end, healing comes first to someone who is counted among the least!

And then, the scandal of what Jesus has just done, is only *heightened* by the public announcement that he is now too late to do what he had contracted to do: Jairus' daughter has died. Jesus could not have screwed up any more if he'd actually tried.

But, again, what Mark is suggesting is that Jesus *had every intention of screwing up!* Because he's now showing us what his new social order looks like; what his new, radically inclusive messianic community looks like. And when Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, *this* is what he means. This is the Kingdom taking shape.

The old social system of honor and shame is now dead. The old system of religious purity — that separated the “clean” from the “unclean” — is dead. Because it's time for a *new* Kingdom! It's time for a new social order with *equal status* for all. Because only this can liberate the shame-filled outcast, and raise the honorable from the dead.

So you see, there really is so much more going on in our gospel reading, than simply a story about two people being healed. It's literally a declaration of social warfare.

And to that first-century society, that was as hierarchical as it was patriarchal, and whose very social structures were as death-dealing as they were life-giving, *and* who believed whole-heartedly that it was being obedient to the will and purpose of God, Jesus dares to declare that *it was wrong*. That it had *no clue* as to the mind of God. That it had no idea of the love and compassion of God for all people.

Because, here's the thing: Wherever there are people who don't have enough, living side-by-side with people who have too much, the Kingdom of Heaven *is not there*. And wherever there is inequality between the sexes, or between races, or between anything else you can think of, the Kingdom of Heaven *is not there*.

This was the message that Jesus brought to the people of Israel in the first-century. And that's why Jesus was the absolute darling of the outsiders, and absolutely hated by the insiders. Is

this still a message we still need to hear in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? *You bet it is!* Because when I look out at this world around us, I *still* see societies that are stratified; I *still* see inequality between the sexes and races; and I still see a world that is hierarchal and, to a great extent, patriarchal.

And it's into this world that Jesus calls us to go, and share the good news of what *God* has in mind for each and every one of us. And of what *God* has in mind for this society. And of what *God* has in mind for this world.

And now, may God give us the strength and the courage, to share this message, and to live as beacons of God's light and love wherever we go, and to help God usher in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Amen.