

I remember being taken as a child to Stratford to see 'The taming of the shrew' by Shakespeare, with a young actress called Vanessa Redgrave in the lead role. It's a play within a play, a device Shakespeare uses again in 'A Midsummer night's dream'. I sometimes wonder whether he got the idea from Mark's gospel.

Last week we heard a story about Jesus' control of the elements as he calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee. Today we hear about his ability to heal broken human beings, with not one but two healing stories, one contained within the other. There is a certain symmetry to the two stories: the healing of a young girl and an older woman; one in private the other very public; the girl is twelve years old, the woman has been ill for twelve years. Both stories speak powerfully of faith and hope when all may seem lost. Both stories tell of lives transformed by Jesus.

Jairus is a ruler of the synagogue – a bit like a church warden perhaps – respected, powerful but desperate. He must know that this rabbi Jesus is undermining the conventional understanding of God which the synagogue upholds, but he doesn't care. He is willing to risk his own reputation for the sake of his daughter.

The woman has been haemorrhaging for twelve years. She has spent all her money in vain. She is considered unclean in Jewish law, an outcast. She too is desperate.

And then there is Jairus' daughter herself: female and a child, so of doubly low status.

What happens? As Jairus leads Jesus through the crowds they are halted, not by the woman directly but by Jesus, who feels his power of healing being used. She had intended to touch the hem of his clothing and sneak away, but Jesus confirms to her – and the crowd around them – that she has been healed. This woman who has struggled, probably on her own, for half a lifetime now has a public advocate in Jesus himself. She is not only healed physically, she is reintroduced to her community.

You can feel Jairus' frustration during this exchange. He is not a man used to being kept waiting at the best of times. And now the leader whose job is to keep unclean people like this woman out of the synagogue sees his daughter's life ebbing away while Jesus is delayed by a social and religious outcast. The irony would not have been lost on Mark's readers.

Jesus continues to Jairus' house, ignoring both the message that he was too late and the scorn of the professional mourners, and heals the girl. It is a double miracle: a mature woman and a young girl both receive new life.

Both of these stories contain amazing healing but also persistent hope. The woman has exhausted everything she has—her finances, her options—but hope emboldens her to reach out her hand, even when her body and her finances are depleted.

Jairus is told not to bother the teacher any longer, that his daughter has already died. But he and Jesus carry on, continuing to the house to see her. Hope moves his feet, carries him forward.

There is desperation and depletion in both of these stories, yes, but hope is stronger. Hope asks for healing and persists. To hope is to rest in the assurance that Jesus desires healing, wholeness, and fullness of life for all of God's children. As our Psalmist says:

LORD my God, I called to you for help,
and you healed me....

You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent.

LORD my God, I will praise you for ever.

Healing—physical, emotional, societal—takes place in many different ways. To seek healing is to hope for more wholeness, to believe that it is possible. In Christ, we believe such wholeness is not only possible but also desired by the One who created us and loves us.

After a year of pandemic, heated political divides, isolation, and unrest, we are hungry for healing within our bodies, our tired souls, and our communities. To follow Christ is to know and to be encouraged that God desires this healing. God desires fullness of life, peace, and wholeness.

So how do we need to reach out for this healing? What stories do we need to tell? Do we need to ask for help, for rest, for prayer, for companionship, for an advocate? For what and where do you desire healing, and how might you seek it?

To ask for and seek healing is an act of hope and a witness to the love of God. It is to be rooted in the knowledge that God loves us and desires wholeness for us and for our communities.

Today you may identify with Jairus and feel moved with compassion to advocate for the healing of another, knowing that we cannot accomplish another's healing for them, but we can use our voices for good. Or you may identify with the woman, depleted yet determined to take the next step in faith.

Either way, may we seek healing where it is needed and remember that to believe in Jesus is to hope for—even to expect—healing and wholeness. Amen.