

Mark 5:21-43

Last week Tom and I had supper with some friends, and one of them was telling us, with radiant enthusiasm, about a book she was reading by John Francis, an environmental activist.

She wanted us to understand how remarkable and impactful he is, so she told us the following:

a) In 1971 he witnessed a catastrophic oil spill on the Pacific Coast and as a consequence, stopped using motor vehicles.

b) He started walking everywhere “for the environment” and talking to people about environmental issues.

c) He realized that he was talking too much and not listening enough, and so he stopped talking for 17 years. No talking. Meanwhile he walked all over the Americas, got a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree, and taught at the college level. His work has been endorsed by Bill McKibben and Thich Nhat Hanh.

These are the things my friend Paula told us, clearly inspired by his story, and I sat there thinking what an irritating man John Francis must be. How self-indulgent, to make everyone adapt to his peculiarities. How wasteful, to traipse around the earth walking, when time’s a-wasting to get our collective human act together. How arrogant, to make himself the focus of attention with his eccentric behavior when clearly there’s organizing to be done. And there were gigantic holes in his story, like how did he feed and shelter himself when he was walking aimlessly around being so damn pure? Oh, Paula said, he worked. I couldn’t imagine. Here, Paula said, you should listen to his TED talk. You’ll see.

Well, my time is *extremely* valuable so I didn’t listen to his TED talk when I got home. I read the transcript. Paula was a little dismayed. She felt that his voice was part of the message

(because he has started talking again), and she told me that he's charming to watch. I was adamant. I have no time for frivolity, I am a serious person. I have still not listened to his TED talk. That would be 17 minutes out of my life, for God's sake.

But when I sat down to study the scripture for today, I recognized John Francis in Jesus . . . or at least, I recognized myself in the disciples. They are on an important mission with Jesus. He's been teaching the crowd, but a local community leader has interrupted with an emergency: his little daughter is at the brink of death, and could Jesus *please* come right away and do whatever can be done for her? Yes, of course! You don't have to think twice about this! Get going, save that little girl!

But as Jesus makes his way through the crowd, he feels himself touched by someone, and stops short. We, the audience, know what's going on. A woman with a chronic condition, a woman who has tried every remedy and been disappointed, run through all her resources, exhausted every channel, has touched Jesus in the hope of being healed. But the disciples and Jesus don't know all this back story, or even who touched him, and instead of forging ahead to Jairus' daughter and getting the story later if it's really important, Jesus stops like Mister Attention Deficit himself, totally distracted by the touch, and asks who touched him. I am one hundred percent with the disciples, who want to keep going toward Jairus' house because a) there's an emergency and b) you're in a crowd, of course you're going to get touched. But not Jesus. He has to know who it was and what it was about, and then he has to let this woman know that her faith has made her well and call her "daughter" and otherwise waste time on something that Was. Not. Urgent. He did everything but sit down and have a little snack with her and ask for pictures of her grandchildren.

So *of course* the little girl dies. The people at Jairus' house cut to the chase and suggest that Jesus not bother coming any more. But no, he insists on coming along and, as we all know, he resuscitates the little girl and makes it abundantly clear that she's entirely restored, telling her parents to give her something to eat.

The fact is, there is no need for triage in the kingdom of heaven. The disciples and I operate out of the myth of scarcity: we see unlimited need and limited time and resources. In our view, Jesus can't be in two places at once, so he should have made a choice between the demands placed on him, and he should have prioritized Jairus' daughter because she's young, with her whole life ahead of her, and she's in an emergency situation. The woman in the crowd could have waited a day; she'd had this hemorrhage for 12 years anyway.

Jesus, however, does not operate out of the myth of scarcity. Jesus knows that in the kingdom of God there's enough for everybody. And because there's enough for everybody, there's no need to establish a hierarchy of suffering or human value. If you've brought yourself to Jesus to be healed, it's important. So he focuses on this woman with the hemorrhage, has a little conversation with her, and spends the time it takes to attend to her need. And then he goes ahead and brings back the little girl, too.

We are not Jesus, of course, and I don't think the story is supposed to teach us that if you're sick and can't get well it's because you don't have enough faith. But I *do* think that the story is supposed to teach us that there is more spaciousness, more room for serendipity, maybe even more room for quirkiness and eccentricity in this world that God is working in, than we think. John Francis did spend 17 years not talking, but during that time he somehow managed to establish himself as enough of an authority on oil spills to get hired by the Coast

Guard to write oil spill regulations. He doesn't explain how that happened in his TED talk; you just have to accept that he did, which I still think is a little irritating because stuff like that never happens to me. But then after a year he left the Coast Guard and started working on a sailboat, because that's how he rolls, and he says, "I forgot the most important thing, which is why I [had to start] talking. I started talking because I had studied environment. I'd studied environment at the formal level, but there was this informal level. And at the informal level I learned about people, and what we do and how we are. And environment changed from just being about trees and birds and endangered species to being about how we treated each other. Because if we are the environment, then all we need to do is look around us and see how we treat ourselves and how we treat each other. And so that's the message that I had. And I said, 'Well, I'm going to have to spread that message.'"

https://www.ted.com/talks/john_francis_walk_the_earth_my_17_year_vow_of_silence/transcript#t-946472

If a person with a deep and sophisticated understanding of environmental science says that an integral part of the environment is the way we treat each other and ourselves, then that's intriguing. That's not an insight you get to by reading books; that's a recognition that arose to consciousness because he had spent years preparing to see it. He had spent years listening harder than most of us do and moving slowly through space *as a person with some rigorous scientific tools in his head*. NPR published an excerpt from his book in which he recounts a conversation with an oyster farmer who had retired from being a nuclear physicist because of heart problems, and in the way he recounts the conversation, you can sort of see the connection between the unhealth of this chain-smoking physicist and the discouraging way

he thinks about energy. It's very subtle, but it really does point you toward the intricate enmeshment of our spiritual /health/ with the way we think about and act upon problems. I'm floundering a bit here, but I'm trying to say something about how our imagination and energy for problem-solving are limited (or liberated) by how spacious our perception of our personal sphere is. If you have a sufficiently spacious personal sphere that there's time to walk everywhere and the cost of not talking is outweighed by the benefits of listening, perhaps you are a little more in touch with the reality of the kingdom of heaven, and a little more insightful.

To bring it back to Jesus and the disciples, the disciples' fixation on efficiency and scarcity blinded them to the weightiness, the value, of the woman with a hemorrhage. She has a back story, and her effort to get to Jesus today is born of years of futile efforts and renewed persistence. She matters a great deal; you can't boil down her significance to a comparison between her potential lifespan and the little girl's potential lifespan. In stopping and wasting time, Jesus demonstrates that time spent on a person in need is not time wasted. That time did not cancel out Jesus' ministry to Jairus' daughter; perhaps it enriched it.

I think this story encourages us to focus on *shalom*, the "peace" that is abundance and enough for everyone, the hallmark of the kingdom. That, Jesus says, is the reality. Count on shalom, trust God's abundance, and act out of a greater sense of spaciousness.

Loving God,
we come as we are,
with our cares and concerns, and rejoice that none of these things is trivial in your eyes.
We long to find healing in your embrace and to trust the bedrock of your kingdom, which is abundance.
Strengthen our faith and heal our brokenness,
that we may live and act the good news that Jesus showed us. Amen.