

Intercalation

The Rev. Roderick McAulay: Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa
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We have a vacant lot next to our home in Sebastopol. It is not really vacant. Many birds and beasts live or land there every day. There are gophers, more than a family: rather a whole tribe or maybe several clans, each with its own tartan. Neighborhood cats spend hours sitting in the grasses watching for a twitch in the soil that signals a gopher coming to the surface, hoping to pounce.

When I reviewed the lessons for today, I was like one of those cats. There were too many places to watch, too many possibilities, too many holes I could dive down and lose myself in a labyrinth of tunnels. Starting with the story of Abraham's migration across the fertile crescent and Paul's perspective on Abraham; or Jesus asking Matthew to follow him; or Jesus having dinner with tax collectors and persons regarded as "sinners"; then there is the leader of the synagogue and his daughter and, finally, the woman whose bleeding would not stop. Also, there are snarky Pharisees and crowds challenging Jesus at every turn. Where to start?

I have decided to focus on the last part, the story of the girl thought to be dead and the woman with the persistent bleeding. These are, really, two separate stories, one set in the midst of the other. This is a writing device found in the gospels of Matthew, Luke and Mark – there are six in Mark - nesting one story inside another. Biblical scholars call this an "intercalation". It is really not so exotic. Think of the long monologues about Lake Wobegon related by Garrison Keillor. In the course of telling one story he might insert three or four other stories. Mostly

Keillor was just amusing us with his wandering tale. Biblical intercalations, however, are done with some intent. The interior story may shift our understanding of the primary story. That, I believe, is the case with this reading from Matthew.

Jesus is having dinner with a group of tax collectors and sinners. The tax collectors are agents of the Roman occupation, extorting money from populace. The sinners, I suspect, are persons who regard Jewish law and rituals with a casual, dismissive attitude. Pharisees are standing around challenging Jesus for the company he keeps. Suddenly, we read, a leader of the synagogue appears and begs Jesus to come restore life to his daughter. Jesus assents and goes out with him.

All we know about the man who has sought out Jesus is that he is a leader in the synagogue. He holds a position of great prestige in the community. We can imagine that at this moment he is distraught and desperate. He clearly knows of Jesus and believes that Jesus may have the power to revive his daughter. He has gone out to find Jesus and discovers him at this dinner.

This same story is related in the gospels of Mark and Luke. In Mark and Luke we are told that the leader's name was Jairus. They also indicate that his daughter was near death, not yet dead. A crowd is moving with Jesus to Jairus home and in Mark and Luke's telling while on their way news comes that the daughter has died.

While walking to the leader's home our story is interrupted by the story of the hemorrhaging woman. Mark writes that she had been bleeding for twelve years

and had spent all her money on physicians with no cure. She presses through the crowd seeking to simply touch Jesus' clothing. In that instance of intimacy, her fingers on Jesus garment, she is cured.

The key to this story is that under the Jewish laws of purity, this woman is unclean. Like non-kosher food or dead bodies, any body with a discharge of internal fluid, including blood, is unclean. Touching an unclean person makes the other unclean as well. They are contaminated and must follow the prescribed rituals for restoring their purity.

After this healing of the bleeding woman, we return to the primary story of the synagogue leader's daughter. Jesus enters the home, the crowd of scoffing mourners is sent out and Jesus takes the girl by the hand, again a moment of intimacy, and she rises. "She was only sleeping", Jesus says.

It helps to understand that a major element of the culture of Jews and most Ancient Near-Eastern cultures was the dominating value of honor versus shame. Economic and social advancements were not generally easy to come by. If you were born with wealth and power you would stay in that status and if you were born poor you would probably die poor. But, what you did control was your measure of honor and absence of shame. Living a pure life by the rules of Jewish law was the key to honor. Being unclean was a source of shame. A leader of a synagogue holds a position of high honor while a woman with a constant bleeding suffers deep shame.

Imbedding the story of the hemorrhaging woman in the story of Jairus' daughter sends a powerful signal that the grace and power of God comes to all regardless of one's standing on the honor-shame spectrum. Jesus does not recoil from an "unclean" person. Nor does he turn away from those in high and powerful position.

We do not pay much attention to those rules of purity found in Leviticus. Ironically, even fundamentalist Christians announcing that they read every word of the Bible literally, don't abide by most of these commands. But, we do have our own version of purity, our own way of sorting humanity into castes or classes that lift some in high regard and turn away others. Typically for us this sorting is based upon things like wealth, physical attractiveness, aggressiveness and youthfulness. Our culture can be just as dismissive and cruel toward those who don't measure up as Jews were in Jesus' time. Starting with broad categories, in the case children and those with diminished vitality due to age or illness we see this stratification. We have a growing awareness of the abuse of children and the emotional and life-long consequences of those traumas. Likewise, we are witnessing growing numbers of elders who are suffering from isolation and depression. One of the higher-ranking populations for suicides is aging, retired men. And I have yet to mention factors of race and gender.

This gospel lesson is good news. How we sort ourselves is of no consequence in the eyes of God. Jesus quotes the Old Testament prophet Hosea to the Pharisees when he rebuts their criticism of him for dining with tax collectors and unclean sinners. He confronts them with their own sacred scripture. God speaks through

Hosea saying: “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” Jesus is telling us that grace comes to us, regardless of our ritual purity, regardless of our cultural piety. God’s healing and life giving grace flows to us as we trust, as we hold faith. Paul was saying the same thing to the Corinthians in our reading today: that Abraham found grace not in the law – which had not been given in his time – but by his faith. The grace flows from the God who Paul describes as the one “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

Like Matthew and Mark and Luke, writing their gospel accounts, we too can imbed one story in the midst of another. We can place the story of Jesus within the story of our life. Our degree of purity is not the test: our faith is and the measure of that faith is the love that pours through us into our broken world.