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As I was preparing to go to St. Louis a couple of weeks ago for my Aunt Nyla's funeral, I called one of my longtime friends, Dave Houghton, who was the best man when Connie and I got married. Dave is a cop now and I wanted to see if his schedule would allow us to get together while I was in town. But our friendship began when he was a junior in high school and I was in eighth grade and he was the director for the new drama troupe at Kirkwood Baptist Church, where I was a member. Dave taught me the basics of acting and directing and stage lighting and was generally a mentor to me as he earned his bachelor's and master of fine arts degrees in theatre before he turned to the more stable career of law enforcement. But he's still active in theatre, teaching at St. Louis area community colleges and serving as Artistic Director for Soundstage Productions as well as freelancing as a director. So, I was hardly surprised when he said to me, "Hey, be thinking about scripts you can recommend to me. I need something for a community theatre that wants me to direct. Something funny but that hasn't been done too much; something with a good M/W ratio... you know."

Ah, yes; the M/W ratio. If you're a producer or director or some other sort of impresario in the community or small professional theatre business, you know all about the importance of the M/W ratio. It's the number that represents the number of roles for men in the play versus the number of roles for women and it expresses one of the odd situations in the theatre world. There are always more women than men who want to perform on stage and who are willing to work as volunteers or for tiny stipends but published playwrights tend to write plays that have more male roles than female. This dates back to the earliest dramas we know, those of the Greeks, for whom proper storylines involved kings and warriors, as well as to the plays that arose through the Church in the rebirth of theatre in the middle ages, which took their characters from the Bible, where, as you may have noticed, most of the central characters are also men. But the gender bias in role availability has continued into our supposedly enlightened times, which has led to the continual scramble of little theatre script committees to find a show that will satisfy both their grumbling actresses and their paying customers.

And what, you may be asking, does all this have to do with the study of the Scriptures? Well, for one thing, it gave me a snappy title for this sermon when I couldn't come up with anything better; "2M, 2W," which is the code one finds in play catalogues for a script with roles for two men and two women. Our story in Mark this morning, were it a play, would be listed as "2M, 2W, extras," as there are no characters that are actually delineated from the crowd other than Jesus, Jairus, the woman with the bleeding condition, and Jairus' daughter. But there is also a deeper connection between my little theatrical excursus and the theme of our story this morning – that of the place of women in society, both ancient and modern. I will come back to touch on that theme this morning as we consider what we can learn from this story – what happened on that day so long ago, how are these events mirrored in our own lives, and what does this mean for the way in which we conduct ourselves in Twenty-first Century Seattle.

At first glance, the character of Jairus may not seem like a very significant person in the Gospel narrative. Just another concerned father, just another guy with a problem coming to Jesus for a solution. But I think if we dig into the story a bit, we will actually find that Jairus was an unusual and courageous man. He is described as "one of the leaders of the synagogue" in the seaside town of Capernaum, where Jesus has returned after his visit to the Gentile region of Decapolis on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. As such, he has had quite a bit of exposure to

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Jesus, as have the other religious leaders of the town. If you're not allergic to such a request, take up the pew Bible nearest you and look with me for a moment at the beginning of "The Gospel According to Mark," which begins on page 27 of the New Testament. Let's scan the first couple of pages for Jesus' actions in Capernaum. Right there on the first page, in chapter one, verse twenty-one, it says, "They went to Capernaum," and Mark then proceeds to relate the story of Jesus' busy week there. On the Sabbath, he taught in the synagogue, the same synagogue, remember, where Jairus was a leader. He'd apparently made enough of a name for himself doing the preaching in Galilee that Mark mentions in verses 14 and 15 that he got an invitation to speak when he showed up that day. Jesus' teaching that day was interrupted when he was confronted by a man whom Mark describes as having an unclean spirit, which Jesus proceeded to cast out. Mark reports that those at the synagogue were amazed, both by Jesus' healing of the man and by his authority in teaching. Then Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law and everyone in town who was sick or possessed was brought to him. Easy to understand, then, why Jairus came to Jesus with his problem.

But things didn't stay all roses for Jesus in Capernaum. Look now at the next page at the story that opens chapter two. It's the familiar story of the men who chopped a hole in the roof of the house where Jesus was to get their paralyzed friend close to Jesus. I'll bet most of us remember that Jesus healed that young man but do you remember how Jesus scandalized the religious leaders of the town? Look at verse five: "When Jesus saw their faith (that is, the faith of the men who brought their friend), he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Was Jairus, leader of the synagogue, one of these scribes? If not, they were certainly among his friends and associates. Just a few verses later in verse sixteen, some of the town's religious leaders question Jesus for eating at the house of the tax collector, Levi. Then in verse 24, Jesus and his disciples come under fire from the Pharisees for plucking ripe grain to eat on the Sabbath. The very next story, called in the pew Bibles "The Man with a Withered Hand," finds Jesus set against the leaders of the synagogue again for healing that man on the Sabbath. So when we read in our Scripture this morning that Jairus, leader of the synagogue, came to Jesus and asked him to come and heal his daughter, we must realize that either Jairus had to swallow his pride and admit that he was wrong about Jesus, if he was one of those who had criticized Jesus and sought to have him destroyed, or at the very least that he was aligning himself with Jesus in defiance of his peers, his fellow leaders of the town's most significant institution.

The courage which Jairus exhibits in stepping away from his peers and asking Jesus for help is not the only thing which makes him unusual. Women, remember, were not held to be of much account in this society. Mark does not consider it important, for example, to report the names of the two women whom Jesus heals in this story, if indeed anyone remembered those names to tell him. But Jairus is concerned enough about his daughter to seek out the man who all his friends said was trouble in hopes that Jesus could heal the girl. He even asks this questionable fellow to come into the women's quarters of his home, where no man not of the family would normally be allowed and to touch his daughter, who at the age of twelve was at the cusp of unmarried womanhood; a scandalous action! "Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live."

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If Jairus is unheeding of peer pressure and societal norms and taboos in his need, then our second character is even more so. Generally, the unnamed woman suffering from haemorrhages has been understood to have had a menstrual dysfunction. While we moderns may certainly understand the pain and weakness brought on by continual cramps and blood loss, we probably don't think, as we read this story, of the shame and social alienation of this woman. I'm not talking here about the embarrassment and reticence of well-bred people to discuss "women's complaints," as such problems were known when I was growing up. These days there are enough commercials on TV selling products which deal with the primary sexual organs of both women and men to make conversations about such things seem appropriate in almost any setting. But this woman's troubles would have extended far beyond embarrassment. As we consider her plight, let's begin by humanizing her with a name – some legends call her Veronica and identify her with the woman who wiped Jesus' brow when he stumbled on his way to Calvary, so I'll do the same.

As an observant Jewish woman living among other observant Jews, Veronica would have faithfully followed the precepts of Leviticus chapter 15, which mandate the behavior of a menstruating woman. For as long as she was bleeding and for seven days after, she was considered unclean. That meant not only that she was not to be admitted to worship but that anyone she touched and anyone who touched anything that she touched was also unclean until they had taken a purifying bath and had not contacted her or her things again until the end of the day. Effectively, this meant that she was cut off from all human contact, except for that of other menstruating women and those who were willing to undergo a day of isolation themselves. While all of us, especially hard-working mothers, might think that one week off a month sounds like a good idea, imagine being in that condition of forced isolation and rest for twelve years! It is as long as Jairus' daughter has been alive!

So, now, consider Veronica's courage as she, like Jairus, seeks out Jesus amid the crowd of Capernaum. As she was recognized by family and neighbors, perhaps with difficulty after twelve years of near isolation, they would have shrunk from her lest she touch them and contaminate them with her uncleanness. They would likely have told her in no uncertain terms to get back where she belonged; there may have been shouts, imprecations, even curses. She must reach Jesus; risk spreading her uncleanness even to the one she believes can cure her. And now, there is Jairus, one of the leaders of the synagogue, one who would have driven her away had she ever attempted to come and hear the Scriptures read and explained, to pray among fellow believers for her release from this condition.

But Veronica persisted; she touched just the fringe of his prayer shawl, the hem of his garment, as Luke's account says, and immediately her haemorrhage stopped. Rather than making Jesus ritually unclean, the power of the one whom the man with the unclean spirit had called the Holy One of God has healed her and made her clean. The power of Jesus' holiness, his connection to God, has overcome her draining illness. But her story isn't over yet.

"Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before

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him, and told him the whole truth.” Veronica’s joy at being healed was cut short. Healed or not, she was still unclean until seven days had passed, until she had bathed and presented herself to the priest with an offering of two doves to receive the official imprimatur on her return to normal society. Would she be upbraided by the rabbi and the leader of the synagogue? Would she be shunned by the crowd, past even the time when she should have been able to rejoin them? Might she even be stoned? Had she achieved victory or defeat? This moment of her story reminds me of a story I recently read in “ESPN: The Magazine” by Rick Reilly, entitled “The Grinch Who Stole a Homer.” Listen to Reilly’s account of the matter at hand: “It’s this past May’s Minnesota College Athletic Conference state tourney, and Central Lakes College is tied with Rochester, 0-0, bottom of the seventh and final inning. Central Lakes’ pitcher Olivia Graham has her first no-hitter going. Now, with Central Lakes at bat, she just has to hope her team can score a run to lock it up. Sure enough, Central’s freshman first baseman, Ashly Erickson, rips one over the fence. Game over. Madness erupts. As Erickson and her cantaloupe smile round third, some teammates high-five her. It’s the greatest moment in her short softball life. But when she touches the plate, the Rochester players begin shouting, “That’s an out! She’s out!” Then (Rochester coach Jean) Musgjerd helpfully tells the ump that Erickson should be out since, according to the rules, teammates aren’t allowed to “touch a batter or baserunner legally running the bases.” ...The head ump for the tournament listened, shrugged and said, “Batter’s out.” ...So you can guess the rest. Graham lost her no-(hitter) in the ninth and Rochester won, 4-0. Musgjerd’s integrity was in the Dumpster, but hey, her record improved.”

Jesus, of course, is no Grinch. He’s not flushed Veronica from the crowd to rip her for not following the rules but to bless her. “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” Gentle words, probably a helping hand up, since she had thrown herself on the ground before him, likely a smile; with these simple actions, Jesus helped to restore this woman to the society from which she had been cut off for twelve years, completing the healing that had begun when she reached out for him and found that her bleeding had stopped. By calling attention to her healing, Jesus was not boasting of his own health-giving power – these people had already seen that in action – he was telling them that Veronica was healed and encouraging them to welcome her back to her proper place in their lives.

Of course, all this leaves Jairus with a problem. Now the Teacher is unclean by his contact with Veronica who has not yet completed her Torah requirements. Should he still ask Jesus to come and lay hands on his daughter? But that problem is speedily resolved. Messengers arrive with the dreaded news. The delay in Jesus’ arrival has proven fatal to the little girl. All Jairus can do now is go home and grieve. But even amidst his grief, Jairus is able to hear Jesus’ words, “Do not fear, only believe,” and he finds his courage once again and leads Jesus to his home. There, Jesus dismisses the mourners. “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.” The gathered crowd laughs at Jesus. They know from dead. I think that were right in their assumption that the girl was truly dead. I don’t think that Jesus was saying that the girl was simply unconscious or in a coma. Jesus wasn’t playing Miracle Max from The Princess Bride: “See, there’s a big difference between mostly dead, and all dead. Now, mostly dead: she’s slightly alive. All dead: well, with all dead, there’s usually only one thing that you can do... Go through her clothes and look for loose change.” I believe that Jairus’ daughter was all dead and that Jesus knew it. But at this point, remember, he keeps telling people not to tell what he’s

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done. I think Jesus tells the crowd a whopper and sends them away so that they won't know he's raised this young woman from the dead.

By rights, Jesus shouldn't have touched this unmarried female alive or dead – especially now that she's dead for he's taken uncleanness upon himself once again. But that is what Jesus did and it's what he does even now, for us. No matter how unclean we feel we are in the eyes of God, no matter how unworthy we feel we are in the eyes of society, no matter how dead our souls may feel, no matter how cut off from life and love and happiness, Jesus comes with the Good News that we are loved, that we are acceptable in God's sight, that a new and abundant life awaits us in our relationship with him. In the resuscitation of Jairus' daughter and the healing of Veronica, we may see the promise of the resuscitation of our hopes and the healing of our brokenness, all through our willingness to reach out to the model of life in Jesus Christ and to allow the power of God, the power of life and love that flowed and flows through Jesus and through the Holy Spirit, to touch us as we lie dying. I am reminded of the words of Paul to the Romans that I have spoken and heard several times in the last few weeks as I've said goodbye and helped others say goodbye to loved ones: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

How then are we to live with our restored, revived, abundant lives that we have as the gift of God through Christ Jesus? Again, I believe this story gives us our pattern in the life of Jesus himself. We must be willing to be in contact with those society would tell us are unclean or unacceptable. We must reach out to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and shelter the homeless. We must be willing to extend the hand of friendship to those who don't look like us, to those who don't act like us, to those who don't believe like us. We may think that we would no longer shun someone like Veronica, someone with an illness that couldn't be cured, but consider the recent panic over Swine Flu. A friend sent me a cartoon patterned after Ernest Shepherd's famous illustrations for Winnie the Pooh. Pooh and Piglet are strolling along in the Hundred Acre Wood and lettering lets us into their thoughts: "As the two friends wandered through the snow on their way home, Piglet grinned to himself, thinking how lucky he was to have a best friend like Pooh. Pooh thought to himself: 'If the pig sneezes, he's dead.'" It's a crass but appropriate reminder that we are still likely to scapegoat the victims of disease rather than seeking to be Good News in their lives.

Like Jesus, we must be ready to treat all persons with dignity, no matter what their societally imposed station in life may be. To the woman his society considered unclean, Jesus said, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace." Jesus included her as a family member, as someone who counted, someone who deserved shalom. To Jairus' daughter, wasted by disease and blanched by death, Jesus said, "Beautiful little girl, get up." Jesus saw the beauty of her spirit and called her to new life as we must see the beauty of every human spirit and point them to the new life in Christ. Again, we may think that we are beyond gender bias in our society, but careful examination of the public record will show that women still earn less than men in similar jobs, that it is nearly impossible for women to rise to the top in some professions, that women still bear the brunt of physical abuse. If we look at our world as a whole, then we find that women still make up 70% of the world's poor, that in some cultures expectant parents

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often choose to abort female fetuses to try again for a boy, that little girls who are abandoned often end up in slavery as prostitutes, sometimes even sold into slavery by their parents. How can we, in 21st Century America, truly say that we honor women when our advertising empires so often objectify women and their sexuality in order to sell products of all kinds?

“2M, 2W.” Two men, two women – Jesus, Jairus, Veronica, Jairus’ daughter – three people for whom Jesus of Nazareth became the path into new and abundant life. Where, in the *dramatis personae* of our lives, is that same Jesus? Is he a major character, one on whom we focus, the pattern of our lives, the one who touched us and made us whole? Or have we, through our attention to other things, relegated Jesus to the status of a curious extra in our lives, the odd looking fellow who sits at the side of the stage and waits for a turn in the spotlight that never comes? Like the characters in Mark’s story, we owe everything to Jesus and to Our God whom Jesus taught us to call Abba, our Loving Creator and Parent, our Redeemer and Sustainer. Let us give thanks to God in our song but most of all by living our lives in the Way of Jesus.