

*Gracious God, use your Word to teach us how to live and how to love. Amen.*

When I was taking religion classes, we learned all kinds of different ways to read the Bible. The study of Scripture is called biblical criticism. This isn't because the person studying it is "judging" the Bible, necessarily, but because they are analyzing or evaluating it from a particular point of view.

We tend to equate the word "criticize" with an unfavorable judgment. But if you are "thinking critically," you are simply using your brain to analyze or interpret what is presented to you. This is what the field of biblical criticism seeks to do.

Academia has been dominated by the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation for over 100 years. This is the heady approach of European and North American biblical scholars, most of whom are white men. These scholars tend to look for the original context of the biblical writings. The hope is that, if we can only understand what the passage meant at the time it was written, we can figure out what it means for us today.

There is some truth to this, of course. You have heard your pastors use the historical-critical method to interpret Scripture in our sermons and Bible studies. But it's not the only way to read Scripture.

Source criticism, for example, looks at where the Bible passage originated. Was that letter actually written by Paul? Or was it written by one of his followers?

And if one of his followers rather than the man himself, should we take it at face value, or with a ginormous grain of salt?

Then there's literary criticism, which asks how we can use language and structure to interpret a Bible passage correctly. Is it a historical account or a fable? Is it poetry or something obviously intended to be interpreted symbolically rather than literally? Is the text structured so that it highlights a particular character or verse or word that points to a deeper meaning?

Then there's feminist interpretation of the Bible, and womanist, and liberation theology – and all manner of Biblical criticism that comes from historically oppressed communities. These get separated out as their own fields of study, because the historical-critical method is often seen to be the primary method of interpretation. Everything that is not white-male-centered is considered a specialty field in academia.

Well, friends, welcome to the specialty fields!

I love the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation. But I usually use that method as a tool, to inform my interpretation of Scripture from feminist, literary, and liberation perspectives.

And now that you know more about academic biblical interpretation than you ever thought you would, let's look at the Gospel text for today, [Mark 5:21-43](#).

From a literary standpoint, this passage is fascinating. We have a story about a man asking for his daughter to be healed. She isn't named, so for the sake of simplicity, let's call her Jill. The name Jill means "youthful."

Jesus heads to Jairus' house in order to help Jill.

But then the story gets interrupted. Think of a movie where the scene ends just as it's getting most suspenseful, and you have to watch another storyline play out before you get resolution for the first scene. That's what's happening here. It's a brilliant rhetorical device.

The suspense is high, because Jairus has told Jesus that Jill is about to die. On his way to heal her, Jesus is detained. You don't usually hesitate when you're on the way to see a dying person. The scene is dramatic and emotional. Can you imagine what Jairus thought when Jesus paused to look around the crowd?

And then, right after Jesus finishes his interaction with the woman in the crowd – she isn't named either, so let's call her Ruby – as soon as Jesus wraps up with Ruby, some folks come to say that Jill has already died.

The story goes from suspenseful when Jairus makes his request, to joyful when Ruby gets healed, to tragic when Jill's death is announced.

The reader is left with many questions. If Jesus hadn't stopped to talk with Ruby, would Jill have lived? After all, the woman had been suffering for 12 years, what difference would another hour make?

But the story isn't over yet. Jesus still goes to Jairus' house, and he still performs the healing. Except now, the reader is left incredulous, because Jesus didn't heal a dying girl, he brings a person who has already died back to life!

The storytelling is beautiful. By sandwiching these healings together, the writer makes both of them more interesting and meaningful. To me, this passage of Scripture is like a stained glass window, a work of art that lets you see something in a new light.

OK. But that's not all this Bible passage can tell us. Let's do some feminist biblical criticism.

There are a lot of women issues going on in this story. And Jesus doesn't shy away from women issues. He responds to anyone in need, not just the people like him. Of course, the fact that two female characters are included but not named means that the Gospel writer didn't treat them as equals. But Jesus seems happy to help them both.

The woman who was suffering from hemorrhages had basically been having her period for 12 years straight. This made her ritually unclean – a menstruating woman was not allowed to be in mixed company, according to Jewish purity laws.

If Ruby had touched a man, she would have made him unclean also, and he wouldn't have been able to perform his religious duties. Maybe this was why she only reached for Jesus' cloak rather than Jesus himself.

The fact that Ruby had even ventured out into a crowd must have taken a lot of courage. She probably hadn't been around that many people for a long time.

And then there's Jill. She was 12 years old, which means that Ruby had been hemorrhaging for as long as Jill had been alive. But Jill hadn't started having her period yet. In that place and time, a girl would have been betrothed at a young age, and then married off to her promised husband the month after her first period – once her fertility had been demonstrated.

The fact that Jill still lives at home with Jairus means that she's a girl and not yet a woman. So a man would not have become ritually unclean by being in Jill's company. At least, not until she died.

Touching a dead body was also something that violated Jewish purity laws. So, shortly after leaving a menstruating woman, Jesus comes into contact with a dead body.

You can see why the Jewish religious officials thought that he was disrespectful of their traditions!

But Ruby and Jill were more important to God than the laws were. This is why Jesus heals them anyway. Even when a woman is going through unmentionable discomfort or distress, God cares and wants her to be made whole.

This is a game changer for many women. We have been told by society – yes, even today – that we don't matter as much as men. But today's Gospel story counters the narrative of our culture, and brings women's issues front and center in God's interaction with humankind.

From a feminist standpoint, this reading is full of nothing but grace and good news! God cares even about our lady problems. We are important enough to the reign of God that Jesus will restore us and welcome us to that community.

OK. I could lead a weeklong Bible study course on this passage. But for now, let's consider just one more interpretation of the text.

Liberation theology came out of Latin America, from people who had been living under the thumb of colonialism for hundreds of years. The basic message of liberation theology is that God is on the side of the oppressed.

And so, when you find yourself oppressed, the question is, how does this Bible passage give me freedom?

And if you are not oppressed, the question becomes, how does this Bible passage teach me to help those who are oppressed find their freedom?

Ruby, the hemorrhaging woman, had tried to get better, and it had bankrupted her. There was nothing that anyone could do. She seemed destined to live a life of isolation.

And then she heard about a healer – a savior – and recognized a new possibility for freedom.

And when Jesus realized that this woman was trying to sneak in a healing, he noticed. And he called her out. And he honored her, acknowledged her need, freed her from her isolation, and healed her.

Jesus doesn't let Ruby go simply with the physical healing she got from touching his cloak. He makes sure that he can look her in the eye and say, daughter, your faith has made you *well*.

In other words, because of her faith, Ruby was not only healed from her physical ailment, but she was given another chance at all of life. She could again be part of society, go where she wished, do what she felt called to do.

Jesus liberated her.

Jill's story is a little more difficult, since she is entirely passive throughout the narrative. But we do know that she had come under the control of some kind of illness that was so oppressive, it eventually took her life.

And Jesus liberated her from that illness. He restored her to life.

A liberation perspective on this Bible passage tells us that God restores us to community when crisis happens.

So, if God does that for us, are we not to do that for other people?

When folks have been removed from their families or their homes, from their children or spouses, sometimes we have the ability to reunite them. Scripture teaches us that we have a moral obligation to do so. As Jesus healed both illness and broken relationships, the followers of Jesus are meant to do the same.

When soldiers return from combat, or prisoners return from incarceration, how do we help them re-enter society? Do we have enough support to counteract the harm that may have occurred to them?

God's will for people to be restored to community, health, and wholeness. That is what this Gospel reading tells us, through a variety of different interpretive lenses. And so our job is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. We are also meant to restore people to health and wholeness, and to bring them back into the warmth of a loving community.

My prayer for us this week is that we would find ways to honor all people, especially those who are oppressed and marginalized, and that we would do everything in our power to heal them and restore them to community, as Jesus did for Ruby and Jill.

May God give us the courage to do so.

Amen.