In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Gospel lesson for this morning is a story within a story. Jesus had just come back to Israel from freeing the Gerasene demoniac of the “legion” of demons that possessed him. Immediately upon arrival, a crowd surrounds him, each coming to Jesus with their own sets of desires and wants. Out of this crowd comes a ruler of the synagogue; an important religious and social leader. While on the way to do that which the synagogue ruler asked him, Jesus is interrupted. After the interruption, the original story is taken up again and brought to a conclusion. In Scriptural studies, this is sometimes called a “framed story.”¹ Like a master painting within a beautiful and perhaps equally masterful frame, when taken together there is something far more beautiful and lovely than either would have been on their own. The right frame can bring out nuances and details that would not otherwise have been noticed or seen. So too in our lesson this morning. Placing this story of Jesus within another brings out details, and even a total vision, that we would not have otherwise seen.

So then, to see this total image of Christ our Lord, let us look to the story itself.

Jesus is in the midst of a crowd, surrounded by all sorts of people. Suddenly, out of this crowd, a religious leader, a ruler of the synagogue, an important social and religious person, sees Jesus. Perhaps he has heard stories about Jesus, perhaps he himself has heard Jesus speak. But whatever the case, in desperation, he bows down before Jesus and cries out, “my little daughter is at the point of death” (v. 23). We don’t know what he knew, we don’t know what he might have heard about Christ Jesus before this moment. But he knew enough that at the point where his daughter is on the verge of death, at the point where all human possibility is exhausted, he knew that he could yet hope in Jesus.

And that is precisely what “at the point of death” means: all human possibility has run its course, all human possibility is exhausted. We don’t know what is ailing her, we don’t know how long she has been at this point, or if this came on all of a sudden. But what is clear, is that unless Christ Jesus intercede, unless the Lord intervene, there is no hope, his daughter will assuredly die. The situation simply could not be more desperate. The finality of death is impinging upon him, death’s seeming omnipotence has come to bear on this man and his daughter.

And so he didn’t even hesitate in dropping to his knees in the rocky and sandy soil before Jesus.

“My little daughter is at the point of death,” he cried out, “come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live” (v. 23). He trusts that if Jesus would but lay his hands on his daughter, though she be at the point of death, she will yet live.

Jesus, obviously moved to compassion, follows this man. But on the way, Jesus is interrupted. On the way to putting his hands on the young girl and healing her, someone else reaches out her hand to be healed. This woman for twelve years has had what our text calls “a flow of blood” (v. 25): “[for twelve years],” Holy Scripture says, “she had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better, but rather grew worse” (v. 26). She had gone from physician to physician, perhaps from specialist to specialist, spending all that she had, not just spending all of her money, but spending all of her hope as well, and grew worse and worse. Like the ruler of the synagogue, she has exhausted all human possibilities. There is nothing humanly possible that can be done for her: unless Jesus Christ intercede in this situation too, unless the Lord intervene, there is no hope.

But she yet had hope: she did not despair. She had heard the reports about Jesus, she had heard enough about him to know that he could make her well. Perhaps she had heard about all of the others that he had healed, perhaps she had heard about the demons that he had cast out, perhaps she had heard that he was God’s only begotten Son: we do not know. But she heard enough to be able to say: “if I touch even his garments, I shall be made well” (v. 28). And she did. In faith, in hope, she “came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment,” and “immediately the hemorrhage, [the flow of blood,] ceased; … she was healed of her disease” (v. 27, 29).

Her faith was not unfounded. She had thought to herself, all I need to do is touch even Jesus’ garment and that will be enough for me, I will be healed. Well, she is healed: she touches his garment, and not just the symptom, but the very disease itself is healed. When Jesus heals, it goes deeper than just the symptoms: it cures the thing itself, it cures the disease.

But Jesus does not stop there. Jesus has something further for this woman, and so he turns to the crowd and asks: “who touched my garments?” (v. 30). The same woman who seemingly without any hesitation at all had come up behind Jesus to touch his garment is called out of anonymity: and now she trembles and is afraid. But nonetheless, she comes and kneels before him, bows before him, and “tells him the whole truth” (v. 33).

The church’s preachers have often been tempted to want to scold this woman for what she has done. It is sometimes taken as a lack of faith that she was content just with touching the hem of his garment. She should have presented herself by bowing before him from the beginning, it is often said, just as the ruler of the synagogue did. Or it is said that touching his garment is an act of mere superstition, or at least tainted with superstition. This is taken as a sign of weak or malformed faith.

If that were true, then you would expect to see Jesus correct her, or scold her for her superstition. But that is not at all what he does. She “tells him the whole truth,” tells him what she had done, and his response is to call her, “Daughter.” “Daughter,” Jesus says to her, “daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease” (v. 34).
Jesus does not scold her for what she has done, he does not tell her that she needs to move beyond material matters: he welcomes her as his daughter, showing that his concern and love for her is not unlike the ruler of the synagogue’s concern and love for his daughter.

And while Jesus was still speaking with this woman, someone from the synagogue ruler’s household comes up to him and tells him that his daughter has died. She was at the point of death, and now that point is in the past. Jesus had lingered too long with this other woman, and a little girl had died because of it. Both had been at the end of human possibility: a little girl at the point of death, and a woman with a twelve-year disease. Well now too it seems that death’s finality triumphed: the girl has died.

But Jesus, hearing this report, defies human possibility: ignoring what the messenger said, ignoring the finality of death, ignoring the seeming omnipotence and triumph of death, Jesus turns to the man and says what only God deep in the flesh could say: “do not fear, only believe” (v. 36). Jesus refuses to bow down before death, Jesus refuses to acknowledge death as the final reality, the closing off of all hope. What marvelous words to someone who has just heard news of his own little daughter’s death: do not fear, only believe. This report, these words which you have just heard about your daughter, they are not the last words, I have yet other words to say about her, and more than this, I have yet more words to say to your daughter.

And so Jesus goes to this synagogue ruler’s house. When he arrives, the scene is one that seems appropriate if death is indeed the finality reality. “When they came to the house,” our text says, “he saw a tumult, [a great commotion,] and people weeping and wailing loudly” (v. 38).

Jesus’ response to what he sees, however, may not be what we would have expected. Jesus dismisses this weeping and wailing entirely: Jesus says, “why do you make a commotion and weep?” In Romans, Paul instructs the church to “rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” (12:15). Is Jesus contradicting Paul here? Is Jesus so heartless that he cares not that a little girl has died, or does it mean nothing to him that this people are weeping because of this girl’s death? Of course that is not the case. It is because of Paul being inspired by Jesus’ own Spirit that Paul instructed the church to weep with those who weep.

So Jesus doesn’t respond that way simply because they were weeping. Jesus was fighting against a certain custom of the day. When someone died, the family would hire people to come and mourn over the one who died. These mourners were paid to lead the mourning, with loud and boisterous wailing and tears. This was no lament like what Israel had been taught to enact—taught through the Psalter and the Old Testament Prophets, but taught especially through the book of Lamentations.

To mourn and lament in a way consistent with Lamentations is itself an act of hope. As in our reading this morning from Lamentations, in which hope in God is expressed in the midst of lamenting. To lament in the face of death is to embody hope, not despair.

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2 For what follows I make liberal use of Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics IV.2:227.
The scene that Jesus encountered when he entered the synagogue ruler’s house was precisely the opposite: it was embodied despair that he encountered. The paid mourners were not lamenting, but were embodying despair, which perhaps explains why these pretend mourners can so quickly turn to laughing at Jesus when he says, “[the girl] is not dead, but sleeping.”

But this one custom was not Jesus’ true enemy: Jesus had come to put an end to death itself. Any ritual or custom that grants death a greater power than Christ himself must also then be put to an end.

Jesus grants no power or authority to death, he denies the seeming finality and omnipotence of death. Jesus says that the girl is not dead but sleeping. He says this not as a vain and empty wish, he says this as a decisive fact, as the true reality. He can say this because he is God in the flesh, he is Life itself. “When Jesus enters this house,” when Life itself enters the house, “it can no longer be a house of death.”

And so Jesus goes into the little girl’s room, takes her by the hand and says to her, “Talitha, cui,” which literally means, “little lamb, arise.” And even in death, even from the seemingly infinite chasm between life and death, even from the other side of the finality of death, the little girl obeys the voice of her Lord, the voice of the one who called her to be rather than not be. Before the voice of Christ the Lord, death has no power.

From the beginning of Jesus’ life, his work and mission is to put an end to death. Saint Paul calls death Jesus’ last enemy. But, from the beginning of his mission until the end of death, Jesus is yet busy healing humanity, just as on his way to raise the little girl from death he healed the woman who too was beyond human help. We could all look around us at the world and our own city, and surely it will look as if death is reigning supreme, as if death is to have the final word. This is not just the case at the world level, but in our own lives as well. But God’s omnipotent mercy is set entirely against this seemingly obvious reality.

It is for this reason that the Word became flesh, that God’s only Son came to be a human. He came so that he might put death to death. But he does it in a most glorious and unforeseen way.

I had said earlier that the church has often not known what to make of the woman who wants to only touch Jesus’ garment instead of come before him like the ruler of synagogue. Often preachers have been just a bit uncomfortable with her trust that she only need touch the garment. But Jesus doesn’t scold or chide her for this. He calls her to him because what she yet needed was to hear his words, she needed to speak with him, she needed to communicate with him. She needed to hear Jesus call her “daughter,” and to tell her to go in true and perfect peace.

Well preachers have also often criticized the ruler of the synagogue for his initial request from Jesus, that Jesus would “lay his hands” upon his daughter. Didn’t the ruler know that Jesus only needed to say the words and she would be healed? He didn’t need to go all the way to his

3 Ibid.
house, since he was God after all. Or so they say. But, Jesus did go to his house. Indeed he could have just said the words and she would have been healed. But Jesus didn’t. Jesus went into her room, and took her by the hand before he spoke to her.

Jesus was showing us what his mission is. Jesus did not just come to merely speak commands and correct all that was wrong with this world. He surely did speak commands, but that was not all he did. The Word of God took on human flesh, and as a human, Jesus himself touched that which plagued humanity. Jesus set to rights all that was wrong with this world, by taking the world and its sickness and its death to himself.

And when Jesus goes into the house of the little girl, he goes in to show us that he has come to fight death itself. He has come to put death to shame, to put death to death. But He will not fight death from a distance. How will he fight death? By touching it. He will fight death by letting it touch him. Jesus need not fear touching death, he need not fear letting death touch him. For his life is greater than death: his life is the greater reality. In the raising of this little girl he looks forward to the day when he will go up on a cross and let death fatally touch him. But in the end it is death itself that will be fatally touched. Jesus will put death itself to death by himself going all the way to death. He will let death touch him to the very core of his being. But there, precisely there, death will be undone. Death will touch Life itself, and death will be defeated. His Life is greater than death, greater than this little girl’s death, and greater than any of our own deaths. And so Jesus can indeed call death nothing but sleep. Before him, death is no more.

But what then shall we say about our own lives? Are we to live our lives in some blind denial that death exists at all? Are we to live our lives as if death has entirely disappeared from the face of the earth? No, I do not think so. And indeed this would be an utter impossibility for many of you who have had spouses or children or other dear friends and loved ones die. Paul, in 1 Corinthians, says that death is Christ’s last enemy, and that in some way it is not entirely defeated. But, we as Christians know that death is not the final word. We know that death has no finality. And so even our mourning is not done without hope. For before Life in the flesh, before Jesus Christ, death must and will give way.

And until the day when death is finally subjected entirely to Christ, we are given an image in our Gospel lesson for how all of this shall take place. While the little girl was yet dead, Christ Jesus took her by the hand, and only afterwards did he speak those loving words to her, “little girl, I tell you, arise.” When our loved ones die, when we see those that we love ravaged by disease, the Lord is telling us too, “do not fear, only believe”: I have the one that you love by the hand, and I will not let go.

We don’t know how long we shall have to wait, we don’t know how long the intervening time will be, but there will certainly be a day when Jesus will say to all those that we have loved, when he will say to each of us, when Jesus will say to all those that he even now has by the hand, “little son, little daughter, I say to you, arise.” And what seems to be an infinite chasm between life and death will be immediately crossed: for out of the seeming finality of death, we
will obey Christ’s voice, and we shall see him face to face; we shall see the glory of the Lord in
the face of Jesus Christ,

who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.