

Not semi-colons, just a comma
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Mark 5:21-43
June 30, 2024
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

My wife Ruthie's favorite joke goes like this: What's the difference between a cat and a comma? A cat has claws at the end of its paws. And a comma is the pause at the end of a clause. If you're ever at a party with an English teacher who happens to be a cat lover, there's your joke.

In the play and movie 'Wit,' Vivian Bearing is a renowned professor of English who has spent years studying and teaching the brilliantly difficult Holy Sonnets of the metaphysical poet John Donne. She recalls a meeting with her mentor, E.M. Ashford, when Vivian was her student at age 22. Professor Ashford tells Vivian to re-write her paper on Donne's sonnet number 10, 'Death be not proud,' because she relied on a translation with punctuation that is not authentic.

Professor Ashford goes on to say, "The sonnet is ultimately about overcoming the seemingly insuperable barriers separating life, death, and eternal life. In the edition you chose, this profoundly simple meaning is sacrificed to hysterical pronunciation:

'And Death-*capital D*-shall be no more-*semi-colon!*
Death-capital D-comma-thou shalt die-*exclamation point!*'

Professor Ashford then quotes from her preferred Gardner edition:

'And death shall be no more, *comma*, Death thou shalt die.'

She adds, "Nothing but a breath-a comma-separates life from life everlasting. It is very simple really. With the original punctuation restored, death is no longer something to act out on a stage, with exclamation points. It's a comma, a pause. This way, the *uncompromising* way, one learns something from this poem, wouldn't you say?"

Life, *comma*, death.

Soul, *comma*, God.

Past, *comma*, present.

Not insuperable barriers, not semicolons, just a comma.”

In our Gospel passage today, Mark gives us a ‘healing sandwich.’ He starts a healing story. It is interrupted by another healing story. And then we return to the seeming conclusion of the first story. At first glance, the two healing stories seem unrelated.

The first story is about the daughter of Jairus, a prominent and probably wealthy leader of the synagogue. The second story is about a courageous woman who spent all her money on treatments that didn’t work. But did you catch the connections? Jairus’s daughter is 12 years old. And the adult woman has been suffering from hemorrhages for 12 years.

In our Baguette Brother’s men’s Bible study Thursday, we wondered about the significance of the number 12 in both these stories. One brother pointed to the 12 tribes of Israel. Another mentioned the 12 original apostles of Jesus. And one noticed that around our table that morning there were 12 Baguette Brothers. With our trademark humility, we decided *that* had to be the real significance of 12.

But then, another brother thoughtfully reflected that when a group reaches the number 12, it’s grown beyond a small family or group. It’s become a community with some degree of diversity. And later I wondered if there was significance not only to the twelve, but to the years. Jairus’s daughter was being formed over years in relationship with her parents and community. The courageous woman had suffered and felt pain for years. Her relationship with her disorder was not a welcome one, but it was a long-term relationship nonetheless. She never gave up on hope on finding a way to heal. And perhaps the gospel writer is alluding in the double mention of 12 years that healing does not fully happen in an instant. Healing emerges as multiple layers are unpeeled over time. It happens within and through ongoing relationships.

Notice how the two healings seem to end. Jesus seeks out the courageous adult woman. He invites her into a relationship as he calls her ‘Daughter.’ He compliments her on her active, persistent faith. Jesus says, “Go in peace and be healed from your disease.” Even though her bleeding had already stopped, he knew there was more ongoing healing needed in her life, as there is in all our lives. Now look at the end of the other healing. Notice that Jesus instructs the family of Jairus’s

daughter to give her something to eat. Yes, she's alive now, but her healing depends upon offering her ongoing nourishment and attention. With these two acts, Jesus shows that his real concern for these two daughters is their well-being and wholeness over the *next* 12 years. Healing and faith are not nouns, but forward-looking verbs.

Not semi-colons,
just a comma.

Back to the play and movie *Wit*. At age 50, Vivian Bearing is diagnosed with stage 4 ovarian cancer. Her doctor advises her to enter into an experimental treatment program involving high doses of targeted chemotherapy. While believed to be effective, it would have pernicious side effects. Vivian agrees to the program, but later wishes she had asked more questions.

Jason, the young medical resident assigned to her, turns out to be a former student of Vivian's. She asks if he was an English major. Jason says, "No. Biochemistry. But you can't get into medical school unless you're well-rounded. And I made a bet with myself that I could get an A in the three hardest courses on campus." Vivian learned that he earned an A minus in her class. She later wished she had given him an A in hopes that he might have treated her better. Jason comes to see her body as simply a guinea pig for this experimental treatment program. His main dialogue with Vivian after their initial exchange is to admonish her constantly, "Keep pushing the fluids."

During her hospital stay, the only person who offers her a modicum of humanity is her nurse, Susie. As the chemo treatments tear Vivian's digestive system apart, Susie learns the only thing Vivian finds soothing is a popsicle. One day when Susie brings her a popsicle, Vivian breaks it in two and gives half to Susie. She sits down next to Vivian's bed and they just talk for a while.

Susie tells Vivian what the doctors will not tell her. While the treatment had reduced the tumor, the cancer had spread to other parts of her body. Susie went over the options in the event Vivian's heart stops. She could be coded and the team would take aggressive measures to revive her. Or she could have a 'Do Not Resuscitate' order placed in her chart. After thinking about it, Vivian asks her to place the DNR order.

As Susie walks toward the door, Vivian asks, "Susie, you're still going to take care of me?" Susie turns around, smiles, and says, "Of course I am, Sweetheart." Vivian

thought about all the difficult nuanced words she had learned and loved over the years. And then she reflected,
'Now is the time for Sweetheart.
Now is the time for kindness.'

When Vivian became more and more unresponsive, Susie still spoke to her in a gentle voice. One day, she noticed her hands seemed red and calloused. Susie carefully and lovingly wiped them with lotion. It was as if she was anointing Vivian, much the way Jesus held the hand of Jairus's daughter, much the way Jesus's courageous new adult daughter reached out her hand and touched his cloak.

Another day, Vivian's heart stopped. Jason ordered a code and began CPR with her. Susie rushed in and told Jason she had a DNR order. Jason wouldn't stop, continued to pound on Vivian's chest, and the code team surrounded her. Susie pleaded with Jason and everyone to stop and showed them Vivian's chart. They finally relented. Susie pushed Jason away.

Jason had just seen Vivian as a body, an object for research that he wanted to keep on doing. Susie saw Vivian as a living, breathing human being deserving of a death with dignity, which, too, is a form of healing. Susie saw Vivian as her sweetheart, her friend whose tired body and soul deserved a pause, and then a chance to be embraced by the light of the next phase of her journey.

Jesus began the healing of Jairus's daughter,
comma,

Jesus began the healing of his courageous new daughter,
comma,

Susie began the healing of her sweetheart Vivian,
comma,

What is our next clause at the end of the pause?