

## ***The Upshot of Desperation***

*a sermon delivered by Rev. Scott Dalgarno on June 27, 2021*

*based on Mark 5:21-43*

Last week we looked at a miracle story from Mark's gospel that had at its center the desperation of Jesus's disciples. A storm came up while they were in a tiny fishing boat and by calming the wind and the waves Jesus calmed his disciples' hearts.

This week we get *two* miracles connected with desperate people and the accounts of them are told so well with such striking and relatable detail that they both have the capacity to touch us at our deepest places. This time, Jesus is not a remote figure with cosmic powers. This time it's as if we are right there when they happen. Maybe it's because we can so easily identify with the father whose daughter was fine yesterday but today is dying and also the woman who has a chronic condition and has been sick for a dozen years.

I mean, look, I think of my own daughter when I think of Jairus's daughter; yes, and the woman with the hemorrhage could be my mother.

I've spoken of my daughter's recent cancer diagnosis but I also think of how desperate I was many years ago when, age of four, she was suffering what seemed to be simple ankle sprains. Both ankles at once, which was weird. We liked her pediatrician a lot, but all she could recommend was wrapping the ankles and waiting.

Well my daughter started feeling very sick one night and we took her to Emmanuel Hospital in NE around midnight and the doctor we saw there looked her over and unwrapped one of her ankles, and nothing prepared me to see the mass of purple bubbles her ankle had become.

I was terrified, but for this specialist it was proof, without the need of a blood test, that she had an auto-immune condition that could be serious but that, for most, was just a stage of development that should pass in a period of a couple of months.

In moments I went from the terror of something that looked terribly worrying to being told she had a rare but treatable childhood condition. I, the desperate dad, felt so lucky to be with someone who knew what was really up and what could be done.

When Frederick Buechner's daughter was in the hospital struggling with anorexia and declining, Buechner wrote, "The only way I knew to be her father was to take care of her—to move heaven and earth to make her well, and, of course, I couldn't do that. I didn't have either the wisdom or the power to make her well" (*Telling Secrets*, pp. 23–26).

Yes, and it was killing him.

So, okay, let's look at the original story from this morning's text: Jesus starts to walk with Jairus toward Jairus's home to see his critically ill daughter. In a moment there comes an interruption. A woman shyly approaches Jesus from behind and touches his garment. He feels it—feels power go out of him. So he stops walking and turns to her.

She's desperate too. We don't know her name, but we know her condition. She has been slowly, steadily hemorrhaging blood for twelve years. And her condition has made her a pariah, an outcast. Mark tells us something that makes members of the medical profession cringe.

Mark says, "She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all the money she had; and she was no better, but rather had grown worse."

It's an old story, right? I mean, disease being as tricky as it is, bad stuff still happens. People are sick for decades and someone finally figures out they have, you know, Lyme disease or something else that is sometimes hard to identify.

In the case of this woman, no one wants anything to do with her. It wasn't only the awkwardness, the aesthetics of her condition; no -- the law *itself* prescribed her marginalization. She was considered "ritually unclean." And anyone who touched her was also considered unclean.

She could not do what the religious law required: a monthly ritual of cleansing, which made a woman ritually, and religiously clean again. Worse, she was not permitted to enter the synagogue because of her condition.

It doesn't take much imagination to understand this woman's isolation and terrible loneliness, the guilt imposed on her by her religion which was reinforced every single day by the community that would have nothing to do with her.

And so she, like Jairus, is desperate, and comes to Jesus. She is suddenly a *Jesus* person because being a *religious* person all these years has not only **not** helped her, it has been a hinderance.

So, Jesus stops and talks with her. Now, you can imagine how Jairus's anxiety is increasing. His daughter is dying and Jesus is chatting with this woman.

I imagine the woman cowering in fear. She didn't expect to be noticed. Heck, she didn't think she was worthy of his notice. A touch of his garment is all she was looking for, hoping it might do the trick. She is obviously in awe of him.

Well she should be. He knows that her touching him in the crowded street was not accidental. And look, she gets more than his attention; she gets his compassion, his love.

He calls her, "Daughter," which can sound condescending but under these circumstances, with her essential loneliness and the fact that she is hoping to escape his notice, it is clearly a term of endearment; "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease."

Instead of leaving the scene disappointed and shamed, she goes away healed and affirmed as a worthy person. Formerly estranged, she is called a daughter. Jesus heals her totally, body, mind and spirit, which is what makes him who he is.

Okay, all well and good, but now there is a new problem. *Jesus* is now unclean. He has been touched by a ritually unclean woman. The law is clear about this, too. He must stop right there, go to a ritual bathing place, take off his clothes, wash them, bathe himself—and enter no house until sundown. But, instead, Jesus continues with Jairus; continues on as an "unclean holy man."

So, religion here, instead of helping, is getting in the way all over the place: religious rules are preventing healing. This too is an old old story.

A new vaccine was announced a couple of decades ago that protects women from a cancer that begins with an STD; a form of cancer that killed my grandmother. And some Christian organizations objected, arguing that availability of the vaccine, which is regularly administered to the young, will encourage sexual activity before marriage. For them, the risk of cervical cancer and death is acceptable because of the possible violation of a "religious" rule.

Condoms prevent AIDs. No one disputes that. But some religious groups oppose those, too. Yes, and good sex education prevents a lot of teen pregnancy. Everyone knows that. But many "Christian" groups oppose it.

This all makes me crazy, and this kind of thinking made Jesus crazy too. In today's text he deliberately violates a traditional religious rule, a taboo, in order to heal and restore a woman. He knows the wrong-headedness of much of religion and it makes him a target of the religious authorities. Eventually they will kill him because of stuff like this.

They despise his willingness to reach across social and religious barriers to a marginalized, rejected outcast such as her in order to restore her to wholeness and welcome her to the kingdom of God where there are no walls, no outcasts.

It is impossible to read this story without gleaning from it the corrective that it is the job of religion, **not** to invest its energy in protecting its purity, but to live out its purpose opening its doors, opening its arms, to welcome all, **particularly** those who are marginalized and outcast.

That's what the church of Jesus Christ ought to be about during Pride month and every month; not building barriers, drawing lines to exclude, but reaching out, touching, extending hospitality, accepting, welcoming, affirming, receiving specifically those who culture and religion itself has branded unclean, calling them by their real names: daughters and sons of God. Right? But, tragically, this is not a message 80% of American Christians have gotten.

Okay, back to the story. Now Jesus resumes his journey to Jairus's house. Messengers approach. It's too late. The little girl has died. Mourners are already there, weeping is audible, funeral arrangements are underway. Unfazed, Jesus continues. They are saying, "Be realistic, Jesus. Face reality. She's dead."

No, on he walks. "She's just sleeping," he says. "She's going to be alright." And they laugh at him.

Now let's remember, he's unclean. He's been touched by an "unclean" woman, and he's now entering the house of a leader of the synagogue, a fastidious keeper of the Holiness Code. Nothing in this house is unclean—except Jesus.

And then Jesus takes her small hand in his. The law is clear about that, too. Touching a dead body also renders a person unclean, and those who do so must also engage in ritual cleansing and bathing.

So a second time, Jesus is unclean, this time because of his own action. And he takes her small hand in his and addresses her lifeless body and for the second time says something so intimate and affectionate, something so startling that Mark gives it to us untranslated, in the very Aramaic language that Jesus spoke: "Talitha Cumi": "little girl, arise;" which actually means, "little lamb, come up."

This is beautiful stuff and it's all because Jesus was a beautiful person. So, if you're one of those who says, "I'm not a religious person, but I am spiritual," then Jesus is your man.

I mean, he wasn't particularly religious either. At least he never let religion get in the way of doing the right thing.

In an era now where religious people, whether they be Christian, Muslim, or Jew, are too often the source of outrageous, appalling behavior, all in the name of their God, Jesus himself is a breath of fresh air.

He must sigh hourly over what way-too-many misinformed Christian teachers are saying he wants our world today to look like today.

Okay, I could end there, but I'm still thinking of the woman who had been sick for 12 years. Think for a minute what illness does to a person. You may know very well what I'm talking about here.

Here is a first person story told by Donna Markovah. For me it brings alive what must have taken place between Jesus and the woman with the hemorrhage. Donna writes ...

*When I was in the hospital, the one person whose presence I welcomed was a woman who came to sweep the floors with a large push broom. She was the only person who didn't stick things in me, take things out, or ask stupid questions. For a few minutes each night, this immense Jamaican woman rested her broom against the wall and sank her body into the turquoise plastic chair in my room.*

*All I heard was the sound of her breath in and out, in and out. It was comforting in a strange and simple way. My own breathing calmed. Of the fifty or so people that made contact with me in any given day, she was the only one who wasn't trying to change me.*

*One night she reached out and put her hand on the top of my shoulder. I'm not usually comfortable with casual touch, but her hand felt so natural being there. It happened to be one of the few places in my body that didn't hurt.*

*I could have sworn she was saying two words with each breath, one on the inhale and the other on the exhale: "As. . .Is. . .As. . .Is."*

*On her next visit, she looked at me. No evaluation, no trying to figure me out. She just looked and saw me. Then she said simply, "You're more than the sickness in that body." I was pretty doped up, so I wasn't sure I understood her; but my mind was just too thick to ask questions.*

*I kept mumbling those words to myself throughout the following day. "I'm more than the sickness in this body. I'm more than the suffering in this body."*

*I remember her voice clearly. It was rich, deep, full, like maple syrup in the spring.*

*I reached out for her hand. It was cool and dry. I knew she wouldn't let go. She continued, "You're not the fear in that body. You're more than that fear. Float on it. Float above it. You're more than that pain."*

*I began to breathe a little deeper, as I did when I wanted to float in a lake.*

*I remembered floating in Lake George when I was five, floating in the Atlantic Ocean at Coney Island when I was seven, floating in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Africa when I was twenty-eight. Without any instructions from me, this Jamaican guide had led me to a source of comfort that was wider and deeper than pain or fear.*

*It's been fifteen years since I've seen the woman with the broom. I've never been able to find her. No one could remember her name; but she touched my soul with her compassionate presence, and her fingerprints are there still.*

*Amen*