

Sermon preached by Reverend Helen Franssell at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 28, 2012

BEGGING AND STEALING FOR HEALING

Mark 5:21-43

What is the single factor that most contributes to creating a really busy day? Traffic? Phone calls? Meetings? *Interruptions* cause us to have to shift gears and refocus. Look for all the interruptions in the passage!

This is the second passage that I am bringing you about desperate people doing crazy things – this time, even begging and stealing! It is about two people who step completely out of their social positions with outlandish expectations, and their expectations are met far beyond what they ever imagined.

This is a long, busy, intricate story, loaded with interesting contrasts and unexpected twists! But this passage is also troublesome in some ways . . . is it reasonable – even *sane* – for us to talk about the dead coming back to life? Is this *magic*? Is it supposed to be a *formula* of the way WE should ask things of God? And as it turns out, it all winds around together to give a pretty amazing perspective on these questions. There is much in this scripture that informs us about *prayer* and our *relationship* to the One to Whom we pray, and it's all related to *faith* and the scope of His answers to the prayer of faith.

There are five things that are apparent about the prayer of faith:

1. There's no such thing as an "interruption" in God's schedule. Jesus was interrupted all the time – by children, even. Do you remember the story of Matthew 19 about how the children interrupted a very theological discussion that Jesus was having with some very smart and important people?

Here Jairus interrupts Jesus teaching the crowd; an unclean woman interrupts the trip to the house of this very important man, and to add to the distraction, the disciples accuse Jesus of a very stupid question in this crowd of people pushing and jostling: "Who touched me?" Jairus' people interrupt Jesus' conversation with the woman, who was cowering on the ground before Him, having just been healed – a very awkward moment! An interruption interrupts the interruption . . . but none were true distractions – all are very instructive interruptions, as it turns out. Because rather than distract, the interruptions served to draw attention to a mighty work that Jesus did and was about to do – they heighten the expectation. He had healed the woman, and He was going to raise a girl from the dead!

So – there is no such thing as an interruption in our relationship to God – only greater opportunities to see His work.

2. Any barrier that we might create that separates us from God is artificial and a lie. Did you see all the barriers in the story? A respected, important, wealthy man with an

unclean, poor, shunned outcast of a woman, just to mention a few, in addition to the obvious physical barriers created by the crowd and the distance to Jairus' house.

a. Because of her constant bleeding the woman was unclean, and transmitted her uncleanness to all with whom she might come into contact; if she'd been married, she would now be divorced. She was barred from worship and completely ostracized. And yet she had the audacity to be part of a crowd of people – she'd probably come into contact with dozens of them! Not to mention *Jesus!* No wonder she felt she had to sneak in and steal. But did Jesus judge her for that violation? No! He did call her out, not to judge, but to confirm that He removed the impurity that created that barrier! Instead of transmitting her impurity to Jesus, Jesus transmitted healing power to *her!*

b. And then, if a Jew were to touch a dead body, he would be defiled. Jesus did in fact take the hand of the dead girl, but rather than impurity spilling out to Him, purity – and *life* – spilled out of Jesus to the girl, just as it did to the woman! Neither impurity nor death were barriers for Jesus – in fact, He willingly *took on* sin and even death from all of us!

Barriers arise from the contrasts, but notice that both of them, from opposite ends of the social/political spectrum, wind up on their knees at Jesus' feet, where all barriers are removed; the outcast becomes the center of attention and the top of the social ladder becomes a beggar. The only true barrier from God is sin, and Christ has eliminated that barrier by His death and resurrection. No barrier is so great that Jesus cannot be reached – or rather, that *He* cannot reach *us*.

3. Personal contact is the way Jesus relates. There's a whole lot of *touching* going on here, isn't there – the woman *touches* Jesus' robe, Jesus *lays His hands* on the dead girl, then takes her *by the hand* to help her up. Touching the robe to find healing sounds strange to us, though it was common in that day to believe that a garment, or a shadow of the godly can heal. Mark 6 tells that "They begged Him to let them touch even the edge of His cloak, and all who touched Him were healed." In Acts 19: "God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them."

But it wasn't a garment but a Person – and His power – that healed. Maybe the woman was embarrassed that she had to sneak up to Jesus, or she felt guilty, thinking she was stealing; or maybe it was the chaos that prevented her from approaching Jesus outright. Either way, she *felt* the healing; she *knew* she was whole. And Jesus felt the same thing; He *knew* power had gone from Him – the same power that can still a storm, or multiply bread – a very powerful connection.

No, it's *relationship* that matters. Do you notice how Jesus uses the term "daughter" for her? This is the only place Jesus uses the word in this way, with deep affection. The *woman* was just as much a *daughter* to Jesus as the *girl* was to *Jairus!* There were really two daughters here! And later, when Jesus speaks to the girl whom He had just brought back to life, He used a tender endearment – "little lamb". The point of contact is not the

thing – the robe - but a *person* who had faith in another *Person* in a moment of agreement in prayer. How's that for breaking a barrier! And He's never nearer than when we're aching and desperate. Suffering isolates; Jesus bridges that barrier with His personal presence and power. Now, we don't have the physical Jesus, but we have the Holy Spirit, Who reaches far deeper than even the most loving of hands. Prayer is a conversation between two real *people*.

- 4. God is willing to give what we ask for, and more! So ASK!** The woman “heard the reports”, so she went! We are freely invited to ask and receive:
- Mt 6 – your Father knows what you need before you ask Him;
 - Mt 7: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.
 - Jn 14: You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.
 - Jn 16: Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.
 - I Jn 5: This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us--whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked of Him.

There is no unwillingness here; no one was ever refused – it is our *sin*, or our tiny faith that prevents us from approaching Jesus. But He is *active* in drawing us to Himself. In Romans it says: “*While we were still sinners*, Christ died for us.” We are in no position to come to Him – He comes to us! And “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all--how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?” If He gives His very life for broken, lost people, surely He can give us everything else as well!

Jesus called the woman out of her anonymous place in the crowd so that all could see what faith looks like. (Here it looks a little like stealing!) Was she cowering with guilt, thinking she was caught stealing? Her faith, like that of Jairus, was naïve; presumptuous, perhaps – but it was real faith. We begin with the same unformed trust, like a child. The point is, we don't have to have it all figured out; faith that pleases God is simple – ignorant – a stumbling sort of faith. It is a great drama – people pushing all around, yet Jesus senses her presence, or, her faith. Even in an ocean of prayers, He knows the one offered with the most tenuous faith.

Are you sensing the stirring of faith within you? Exercise it, by God's grace! Jesus will notice! The woman represents all of us – poor, broken, desperate. Christ instructs our faith, no matter how feeble. Her *faith* healed her – not her desperation, not correct words. Let's not be afraid that He won't hear, or that our faith is too small. Do not let Jesus pass by without reaching out to Him!

5. What should we ask for? The need constitutes the request. For the woman, it was years of suffering and poverty. She'd spent all she had looking for a cure, and “had suffered much under the care of many doctors” – anyone here who can relate to that? The Jewish Talmud lists 11 different cures, such as various potions. Or, she would be set in an intersection holding a cup of wine in her right hand, and someone sneaks up behind her

and startles her to scare the sickness out of her. Better yet, she could carry around some barley that was taken from the droppings of a white, female donkey. She probably tried them all, but nothing worked.

And Jairus – a Jewish leader, a man of wealth and prestige – is begging with humility in the desperation of *desire*. It wasn't love or devotion that brought him so much as his need – his love for his young child. His tiny faith would bring enormous witness to a great crowd of people to the power of Jesus, and He responded *immediately* by going with him.

Desire is born of hope; it pushes through obstacles. If we do not ask we do not desire, and if we do not desire, we do not have hope, and if we do not have hope, we do not have faith. There is no such thing as unanswered prayer that is asked in His name by people who are living in Him. He doesn't *drive* us; He *draws* us in our desire. Is God drawing you?

Sometimes we just don't know how to ask for what God wants to give us. The woman didn't really ask, did she; she just knew – she came, and touched. It's the condition of our hearts – not a script, not a formula, not a required amount of desperation. No – we keep asking, and *we are changed by prayer*. So keep desiring; keep hoping; keep growing.

Our story is on the one hand fascinating, full of optimism and promise:

1. There's no such thing as an interruption in God's schedule.
2. Any barrier that we might create that separates us from God is artificial and a lie.
3. Personal contact is the way Jesus relates.
4. God is willing to give us what we ask for.
5. Our requests rise from our needs.

But this story is also troubling – kind of elusive . . . There is one very terrible moment that defines this, and it is for us perhaps the most critical element of this story. Imagine the terrible disappointment and pain that Jairus must have felt at the interruption of his friends bringing the message that his daughter had died. His friends said it all: “Never mind; don't bother the Teacher any more; it's no use; it's over; there's no hope anymore.” This reminds us of John 11, where Martha and Mary both said, when Jesus delayed His coming, “If you had been here my brother – Lazarus - would not have died!” Imagine the awful grief of that moment . . . when it looked like God didn't hear – or care – but it was only a moment, because Jesus immediately rekindled hope by His encouragement: “Don't be afraid; just believe.” Or, as He said to Mary and Martha, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” He is saying: “It's not over yet! Something way bigger is still to come!!!” For Jairus and for the women, it was the bringing of a precious daughter and a brother back to life. What does it mean to us?

When we look at Mark's use of two particular Greek words in each of these intertwined stories we get a strong sense of this “way bigger something”:

1. In both stories the word for “healed” is a very big theological term that is used throughout the NT to describe the healing work of Jesus on the cross. Jairus asked that his daughter “will be healed and live,” v. 23, and the woman expects that she will be “healed” of her disease, v. 29. But it is a word that means far more than physical healing: save, rescue, liberate, restore – to make whole.
2. Second, when Jesus tells the girl “get up,” and when she “got up” – these are the same words used frequently to speak of Jesus’ resurrection!

Now, Christ’s resurrection was still to come at that moment, but from our “post-cross” vantage point we can clearly see that our stories are pointing us to the resurrection power that is present in Jesus, and that power is the basis for all his miracles. Our longing for physical healing parallels our longing for spiritual wholeness. We live in the shadow of Christ’s resurrection, which is the greatest of all healing! We must look at it all in light of the cross!

These stories show us what faith is. We see that answers to prayer are related to faith, and that Jesus is not limited by small faith. They are about sickness and healing and social barriers, but also something far greater in significance. It’s about Christ coming to overturn the old world – and the old person – with the heartbreak and pain and brokenness and death that come with it. So, we are to come to Christ with our heartbreak and pain and brokenness and death, and know that in Christ, it is done; and *that* is peace that surpasses comprehension. We long for physical healing, and the wonder and the joy and the relief that we would experience with a miraculous recovery would be just a shadow of our salvation – the healing of our souls. And neither work is completed yet. So, in this interim, go to God, knowing that there are no interruptions or barriers, that He is with you personally to respond to your need, and be mindful of the bigger story, which is still unfolding.

There is a phrase in a popular movie that was recently released (*The Best Exotic Marigold*): “Everything will be okay in the end; if it’s not okay, it’s not the end.” In the movie it was kind of an existential theory, but for us, it is Biblical truth: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Rom 8:28. It must not be the end yet, because everything is not yet okay – so keep praying, keep hoping, keep asking. Amen.