

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

"DO NOT FEAR, ONLY BELIEVE"

Mark 5:21-43

A desperate father personally searches out Jesus so that his daughter might be healed.

A woman in desperate faith reaches out and touches Jesus so that she might be healed.

The father receives the news that his beloved daughter has died – he fears that he has reached Jesus too late.

The woman's touch is detected by Jesus and she fears the repercussions of her impertinence.

In both cases, Jesus was the last resort, and it appeared that even that option was closed to them. As both the woman and the father were immersed in their desperate hope, now they faced the probability of drowning in their fear. For the father it was the fear of having to live his life out with only a memory for a daughter. For the woman it was the fear of the expected consequences for defiling a holy man. In their minds the questions of should I have come sooner and should I have come at all, loomed large as they peered into the abyss of their immediate future.

But as the holy angels said to the sinful and lowly shepherds, Jesus said, "*Do not fear.*" And as the angels told the shepherds that Jesus was the answer to their fear, Jesus said to these two children, "*Only believe.*" So too, Jesus was to demonstrate how this could be.

Just as there were three populations that served as icons of justice in Jewish social life; the orphan, the widow and the sojourner; there were three populations of people who stood for the unclean; lepers, hemorrhaging women and dead bodies. Coming into contact with any one of these three would render the person ritually unclean and subject to exclusion from the Temple and worship until cleansing had taken place. The exclusion from the Temple symbolized a prohibition from being in God's presence. In this one short episode, Jesus takes on two out of three of these barriers to a relationship with God. When we look at this story from the perspective of Jewish ritual law we see that the lesson to us is that there is nothing outside ourselves that can keep us from a right relationship with God. It is our sin, our choice, our lack of fidelity to God.

The rules of the religious life in Israel at the time of Jesus read like this:

¹The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²Command the Israelites to put out of the camp everyone who is leprous, or has a discharge, and everyone who is unclean through contact with a corpse; ³you shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp; they must not defile their camp, where I dwell among them. (Numbers 5:1-3)

²⁵*If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her impurity, or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her impurity, all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness; as in the days of her impurity, she shall be unclean.* ²⁶*Every bed on which she lies during all the days of her discharge shall be treated as the bed of her impurity; and everything on which she sits shall be unclean, as in the uncleanness of her impurity.* ²⁷*Whoever touches these things shall be unclean, and shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening.*

³¹*Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, so that they do not die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst. (Leviticus 15:25-27,31)*

Into these very real and very public fears Jesus speaks the promise, “*Do not fear, only believe.*” These are not hollow words, but words of command, said with authority and followed by action. To the woman he says, “*Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.*” Do you see the paradox here? Instead of her uncleanness making this man of God unclean, her faith in him as a man of God has allowed him to make her clean. And furthermore, when Jesus speaks the blessing of peace upon her he is declaring her to be now in a right relationship, that is, reconciled with God rather than excluded from his presence. Do you see the ultimate power of faith in Jesus Christ? What power, grace and mercy Jesus brings to our lives.

Jesus then continues home with the devastated father. Incredibly he goes into the room of the dead girl, and even more amazingly he touches her. Jesus defies another Jewish taboo, he touches the hand of the corpse, but the girl is restored to life. And as if to prove that this was no demonic conjuring act, Jesus demands that they give the girl something to eat. Who can give life, is that not solely the prerogative of God? How can we not fear to be in his presence? But, in the face of the evidence how can we not believe who Jesus is? We should live in awe of God in our lives, but if we truly believe in whom he has revealed himself to be, we should not fear anything else in all creation.

These acts of Jesus were prophetic acts that pointed forward to the truth that Jesus, as the Son of God, would remove our uncleanness and bring us into peace with God. As St. John wrote:

¹⁶*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

¹⁷*“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17)*

Furthermore, St. Paul wrote:

²¹*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21)*

What Jesus did for the desperate father and woman of desperate faith, he has done for you. He has taken your uncleanness to himself and offered you healing of your disease and a new life, now and for ever.

The woman was desperate because she knew she was sick and dying, as each of us is in our relationship with God. She brought her defilement to Jesus believing he could heal her and she was healed. Each of us is defiled by our sin and face only the fear of spiritual death. But Jesus says, *“Do not fear, only believe”* that I can give you eternal life.

The desperate father sought out Jesus because another, who he loved, was sick and dying. We too have family members, friends and neighbors we love that live dying in their sin. He appealed to Jesus and brought Jesus to his daughter and she was given life. Each of us fear for the eternal well-being of those we love. But Jesus says, *“Do not fear, only believe”* that I can give them eternal life.

You have been touched by Jesus, now the rest is up to you. There is nothing outside ourselves that can keep us from a right relationship with God.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, we come before you this day not half as desperate as we probably need to be, but confessing our need for your intervention in our lives and the lives of those we love. We are sinners and sick unto death with our sins. We come to you in repentance for our sins known and unknown. We believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God and the Savior of the world. Through your death you have defeated death. And through your death you have offered us true and eternal life. Drive from our hearts the spirit of fear and fill them with faith through your Spirit. May our lives reflect that faith and may those who do not know you come to a knowledge of you through the witness of our lives. Thank you for the gift of life. Amen.

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on June 28, 2009, the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8).