

Faces in the Crowd

Mark 5:21-43

The surgeon who removed the old man's gallbladder was adamant that his patients were up and walking the day after surgery. The nurses dutifully walked the patient even though he complained bitterly every time. After a week, the old man was ready to go. When his family picked him up, they thanked the surgeon profusely for all he had done. The doctor humbly deflected the praise, telling them that it was a simple operation and that they had been lucky to get him in time. "But doctor, you don't understand," they insisted, "Daddy hasn't walked in over a year!"

Mark 5 records the story of two people who came to Jesus seeking one thing but walked away with far more than they dreamed possible. A father sought healing for his dying daughter but witnessed the power of Christ over death. A chronically ill woman came to Jesus in search of a physical respite to her condition. She found the peace of God that accompanied an even greater salvation than mere healing.

Jesus had just returned from the other side of the Sea of Galilee where He had encountered a man possessed by many demons. When the demons left the man's body, they entered into a herd of pigs which in turn rushed into the lake, drowning themselves. After this somewhat unnerving miracle, Jesus sailed back to the vicinity of Capernaum, the town He had adopted as a base of ministry operations. Here, Jesus is met by a crowd, but our story actually revolves around two distinct faces in that crowd.

I. Jesus Encountered a Synagogue Ruler (21-24a; 35-43)

²¹When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. ²²Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet ²³and pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." ²⁴So Jesus went with him ...

... ³⁵While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher any more?"

³⁶Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, "Don't be afraid; just believe."

³⁷He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. ³⁸When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. ³⁹He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." ⁴⁰But they laughed at him.

After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. ⁴¹He took her by the hand and said to her, "*Talitha kum!*" (which means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"). ⁴²Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. ⁴³He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

A. Jairus Was a Man of Privilege

Jairus was a “synagogue ruler”. This was not a uniquely spiritual function like a priest or a worship leader. He was more of a worship planner in that he selected those who would pray and read the scriptures on any given Sabbath Day. He also extended the speaking invitations to local rabbis. In addition, the ruler was the synagogue’s chief administrator, responsible for building maintenance as well as the management and distribution of offerings. Most synagogues had only a single ruler, but particularly large ones had multiple staff. To achieve this position, Jairus would have had to have been regarded by his local synagogue community as righteous in terms of religious law-keeping. He must have been a fairly well-to-do Jew, certainly better off than the rank and file.

Of course, no one is so privileged in this life as to be insulated from grief. Luke paints an even more poignant picture than Mark does. Luke tells us that this was the man’s “only daughter”, literally, “a daughter, an only-born”. She was Jairus’ only child. She was twelve years old. Among the Jews, twelve was the threshold of adulthood. A boy became a son of the Law at age twelve. Girls were often given in marriage at this age. Just as life’s fullness lay before her, her life was slipping away. When a father is utterly helpless to help a child he loves, having an important job is a source of little comfort.

B. So, How Does a Man of Privilege Come to Jesus?

Childlike trust and humility is the ticket for all of us. Jairus’ faith in Jesus could not have come without a little social tension. Jesus had powerful enemies, so synagogue doors were beginning to be closed to Him. But now, this important man is pictured on the ground begging Jesus for help. Serious pride was being swallowed here. Jairus was a man to whom his faith community turned in times of grief, but sometimes, even a man others turn to for answers has no way to address his own grief. Jairus’ standing was of no value now. One shred of hope remained and that was to run desperately to Jesus.

It’s hard for any man of worldly stature to come to Jesus. All the things that tend to feed a man’s sense of self-sufficiency also tend to feed his reluctance to acknowledge weakness. The man who is strong in his own eyes may dismiss faith as escapism for weak people. We’re all weak. Sometimes, it is because of God’s mercy that something awful crashes into our lives to unceremoniously teach us that we’re not so tough after all. Jesus can minister to the weak, but only those who know they’re weak.

Jesus once lamented: “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:23). This confused the disciples, who thought of wealth as a blessing from God. Of course, it is. Jesus assured them that it was not an impossibility, only a difficulty. He was not stating any preference for poor people over rich people. He was simply being candid about the perils of riches. The more one has, the more potential venues one has to say, “I am not in need of anything.” We are all needy.

On the way to his home, Jairus’ last glimmer of hope was extinguished as the news arrived, “Your daughter is dead ... Why bother the teacher anymore?” The climb of faith through any crisis can seem the steepest right before the pinnacle of the journey. Just at the point you’re ready to throw in the towel – just when you are about to entertain options that you never dreamed you could entertain – that is no time to cave in. Jesus encouraged Jairus: “Don’t be afraid; just believe ...”. You heard how the story ended. We’ll revisit the miracle momentarily. For now, consider a second face in the crowd.

II. Jesus Encountered a Suffering Woman (24b-34)

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. ²⁵And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. ²⁶She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. ²⁷When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." ²⁹Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

³⁰At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"

³¹"You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?' "

³²But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. ³³Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. ³⁴He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

A. This Woman Appeared to Be a Rather Unfortunate Soul

This woman had been sick for as long as Jairus' daughter had been alive. Surely, she was anemic, but that was only a small part of her problem. According to Mosaic Law, she had been in a perpetual state of ceremonial uncleanness for twelve years. Her defilement would have caused all sorts of emotional baggage to be heaped upon an already tough circumstance. She could not worship in the temple. She could not learn God's Word alongside her people in the synagogue. She would have been ostracized socially as well as religiously. The assumption among the Jews, based on the teachings of the Pharisees, would have been that she was in disfavor with God for some sin of her own or of her parents.

On a practical note, the woman was broke. All her resources had been spent on doctors. Finding the right doctor isn't easy. Erma Bombeck used to say, "Never go to a doctor if all the plants in his waiting room are dead." I read elsewhere that if you confide in a doctor about your fear of going into surgery for the very first time and he responds: "I know how you feel. It's my first time too," you should be cautious. Rodney Dangerfield warns about any doctor who cites two prices, one to remove the growth and another for just touching up the x-ray. And finally, if a doctor's post-surgical instructions include the words, "Stay out of the yard and don't lick the incision," he's not your guy.

In fact, ancient medicine was not very sophisticated. In his book, *The Christ of the Gospels*, J.W. Shepard cites the *Talmud*, a volume of Jewish religious and civil law, on a treatment for this particular malady: "... set her in a way where two ways meet" (a crossroads) "and let her hold a cup of wine in her right hand and let someone come behind her and frighten her and say: 'Arise from thy flux.'" That might work for curing hiccoughs but not for chronic bleeding. Of course, if that didn't work, the *Talmud* recorded ten more similarly off-beat incantations. It's no mystery to me why the woman was broke after twelve years of medical care and even sicker than she had been in the first place.

B. So, How Does a Rather Unfortunate Soul Come to Jesus?

Unfortunate people come to Jesus the same way privileged people do, desperately. The only difference is that the distance to a point of desperation is usually shorter for an unfortunate person. Issues of self-image were meaningless to this woman. She thought she could just sneak through the crowd, touch Jesus' cloak and be healed. Not very sophisticated, was it? In fact, her faith seemed superstitious. Her actions were even a bit irresponsible, for to push through a crowd was to defile everyone she touched. But, the desperation of the faith that drew her to Jesus also moved the heart of Jesus.

Her plan nearly worked, but Jesus knew that power had gone out from Him. She was “trembling with fear” as she fell at His feet. In her uncleanness, she had touched a holy man. Jesus might be angry, but He was not angry. He did not fear defilement. Not only did Jesus heal the woman. He gave her peace.

Do any of you remember Curtis Leon Chapman? Several years ago, he showed up in our services on foot carrying a staff, a Bible and an old hymnal. He asked to sleep in the church, but we found him a motel room. I took him to the motel to get him situated. He asked if he could share a gospel message. I said, “Sure.” For a few minutes, he moved from one scripture to the next, before he became utterly disoriented and incoherent, as though he was surprised anyone would actually consent to listen to him. Curtis was in the fifth year of what he perceived to be a mission to preach that began in Oklahoma. The next morning, he was heading to Philadelphia. He credited God for his provision. Who was I to argue?

This man’s mind was clearly broken. Faith as Curtis understood it was of no practical value to me. It would have been easier and not out of character to snicker, but I could think only of Jesus’ words, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father” (Matthew 10:29). Impractical as his faith was in my world, God had cared for this man for five years. I don’t know if God ever healed what was broken in Curtis, but, I do know that faith riveted to the Person of Jesus is a powerful thing - in Curtis’ case, a survival mechanism.

We could snicker, but it would be more useful to consider the simple desperation of our own faith. Faith has been a survival mechanism for many people. My mind has never been utterly broken, but there have been times that it was too broken and my emotions too devastated to make good choices. Due to sins within or pressures without, my thinking was not clear, but God never abandoned me. When we are broken, we can cling to Christ in our weakness, and He will cling to us in His strength.

The sophistication of our faith usually means far less than its desperation. How do you present your needs to God? Peace and joy elude us when we are more concerned with praying “properly” and with holy rhetoric than we are with simply being brutally honest with our Father about our hurts and needs. A woman came to Jesus in a crude act of desperation. He recognized her presence immediately. Consider one final perspective which though discreet, has been present throughout this narrative.

III. Jesus Encountered a Superficial Crowd

A. Crowds Loved Jesus

Jesus fed crowds. He healed them. He excited them. A crowd met Him as He returned from the other side of the lake. They “pressed around him” as He walked to Jairus’ house. When He asked, “Who touched me?” his disciples observed that everybody was touching everybody. It was a crowd after all. Jesus separated Himself from that mob. Taking only three close disciples, He continued walking.

Another crowd, professional mourners, were making all sorts of racket when Jesus arrived. It seems phony to us, but that was proper funeral protocol, and given Jairus’ position, this was probably a good sized group. But, their insincerity was made evident by the speed at which their tears turned to jeers when Jesus said, “The child is not dead but asleep.” Whatever He said next, they scattered. Only the three disciples with him and the dead girl’s parents accompanied Him into the her room.

“Talitha koum.” Peter, generally believed to be Mark’s source, recalled the precise Aramaic words Jesus spoke: “Little maiden, I say to you, ‘Get up!’” Luke tells us, “Her spirit returned . . .” When Jesus raised the child to life, He told her parents to feed her. Then, He gave them “strict orders” not to advertise the miracle. This was a special work of grace for a bereaved father who had come to Jesus in faith. It had nothing to do with the crowd outside. Raising the dead was not something the rank and file needed to think was going to become an everyday occurrence. I’m sure the secret wasn’t kept for long.

B. Desperation Sets Persons Apart from the Crowd in Jesus' Eyes

Crowds loved this “miracle-man”, but the crowds dwindled when Jesus spoke of service and cross-bearing as conditions for following Him. Jesus was surrounded by a crowd, but it was in the midst of the crowd, and in spite of it, a man humbled himself at Jesus’ feet and found grace. A crowd was almost crushing Jesus, but one woman touched Him in faith, and He knew the difference.

Crowds are exciting, but crowds can have drawbacks as well. A crowd can be a good place to hide from facing personal issues of the spirit. Church is a great place to be and when people who have come through tough times tell me of a desire to get back into the habit of church, I am delighted. But, if you are hurting, you don’t need an institution, you need to run into the arms of a Savior. But know that by His Own design, running to this Savior Who is Jesus identifies you with His church. If you will do that, you will find a whole new dimension to His church that you cannot discover by hiding out in a crowd. You will discover a community of healing, for the church is, after all, the Body of Christ Himself.

The great equalizer of all humanity, without any regard for privilege, is the desperate spiritual need that sin has produced in each of us. What compels anyone to run to Jesus? It is the honest recognition of that need. Jesus will prove Himself to be good for more than you can imagine. A woman came to Jesus seeking a cure and found spiritual peace as well. A man came to Jesus seeking the healing of a loved one and encountered resurrection power. We can hang out in crowds and we can wear masks of false spirituality. But Jesus will meet you at your point of need if you will make Him the object of your most desperate faith. The world calls faith in Jesus a “crutch”. Let them, for He is far more than a mere crutch. He is the Son of God, Who lifts us up and causes us to stand.

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