



# The Trinity Pulpit



## Desperate Acts of Faith

Mark 5:21-43

Dr. Jeff Roberts

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The word “desperation” is defined as reckless action as the result of deep despair. That definition is true in most cases, but acts of faith change the meaning of desperation. All of a sudden desperation is not the result of despair but the result of hope. In our moment of desperation, we give feet and voice to our faith and rediscover our confidence in Christ alone.

In Mark 5 there are two stories of desperate females. One needs the help of her father who voices the desperation and faith. The other seems to be alone in this world and her desperation gives way to hope and action. The two women could not be described more differently, yet they have so much in common. We are told that after Jesus had traveled to the land of the Samaritans and the Gentiles, he crossed back over into Jewish territory. Jesus had healed the man who was possessed by demons. That story, too, is a story about a man who was exiled from community and suffering. Jesus not only restores his health but also restores him to community. The same will happen with these two women.

The first is the daughter of the synagogue ruler, Jairus. There were two important lay persons in every synagogue: the ruler and the attendant. The attendant cared for the building and the property; the ruler was in charge of worship and instruction. The ruler of the synagogue was an important person in the community; Jairus must have been well known, for Mark includes his name. In Mark’s gospel very few names are mentioned until the Passion Story. Yet, here in this story we get a name: Jairus. Jairus would have been recognizable and a religious and social insider. In my mind, I see the crowd parting as he approached Jesus. When the people see Jairus,

they get out of his way; they let him through and almost bow to his presence as he passes by. For Jairus, getting to Jesus was very easy. He was a man of influence and he got access to whomever he chose; Jesus was no different. Yet, Jairus does not approach Jesus with arrogance but with humility and a desperate request.

You can almost here the urgency in his voice. Pleading with him earnestly, Jairus said “My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so she will be healed and live.” Here was a man who had the influence to make things happen and to get almost anything he needed; however, there was only one person who could help him in this moment and that was Jesus. Jairus was the picture of the suffering and burdened parent. This description of Jairus is something to which any parent can relate. We are told at the end of the story that the girl was only 12 years old and she was dying. We do not know everything that Jairus had tried to this point to get his daughter help, we only know that, in that moment, he was desperate.

In 1963 there was another young family in the White House and the nation was excited that the First Lady was going to give birth. But the same family that had suffered a miscarriage and a stillborn child gave birth to a premature boy named Patrick Bovier Kennedy. The young boy only survived briefly and soon succumbed to a blood disease. The nation mourned with their young First Family, for Patrick Kennedy was another reminder that death, illness, and disease are the great equalizers. Jairus was the social and religious leader who found himself like so

many parents, at the place of desperation.

When Jesus heard Jairus' response, he agreed to go to the home of Jairus; however, on the way he encountered another desperate yet faithful person. It was another female – a woman. She is described as a woman who was suffering from hemorrhage. This is understood as some type of menstrual dysfunction. We do not know her name but we do know some things about her. She had suffered for 12 years – as long as Jairus' daughter had been alive, and she had suffered under the care of doctors. Now, this might mean that although doctors tried she still suffered. However, if you read some of the treatments that doctors had developed for women suffering from hemorrhages, you would know the true meaning of the phrase. This was one of those conditions for which the treatment was worse than the illness. We are told she had spent all she had in the attempt to find healing. This could have meant that at one time she was a wealthy person but no longer. Everything she had before was gone. Instead of getting better she only grew worse. You can hear the desperation in that description.

Some of us have been there. Years after years of going to doctors, trying this and trying that to find healing, but nothing works. The only thing that is happening is that you are getting poorer from the healthcare costs and you are getting isolated from others because you are always suffering. If this woman did have anything before, she had lost it all and with it, she had lost her influence. The picture of her getting to Jesus is just the opposite of Jairus. The people are not parting in front of her as she tries to get to Jesus; instead, she is probably being pushed to the side and to the back. She is one who is overlooked. Because of her illness she is ceremonially unclean. That means she is not only physically ill but she is ostracized socially and religiously. She is the exact opposite of Jairus. Yet, her desperation has come to faith just like Jairus. She concludes that there is no need for conversation with Jesus, no reason even for him to look at her face to face; she only needs to touch his garment, just rub ever so gently against the hem of his robe as he passes by and she will be healed. Her desperation has turned to hope and not despair.

You know the end of these stories. The woman

who touched Jesus' robe was healed. Jesus, realizing power had left his body at the woman's touch, stopped in the crowd and asked "Who has touched me?" When she comes forward, he calls the one who is the outcast and belongs to no one, "Daughter." You see, Jairus' daughter had died, but the woman seems to have no one to be with her, but Jesus reminds her she is not alone after all. He says to her "Daughter, your faith has made you whole." Just then, news comes to Jairus that his daughter has died. Yet, instead of being deterred, Jesus and Jairus continue to the house where now, the young 12-year old's body lies. Life had come and gone and death had arrived. Desperation had been replaced by grief yet Jesus told Jairus "Don't be afraid; just believe." When they arrive, Jesus went inside and asked the mourners and the family to leave the room. Then Jesus touched her and spoke to her, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!" The young girl was returned to life and notice to community.

These two women were so different; yet they have so much in common. They both were ceremonially dead, the woman because of her hemorrhage and the young girl because the dead cannot be touched. Yet, Jesus touched them both. And instead of Jesus becoming impure, the women were healed, became pure, and are restored to health and community. Robert Farrar Capon writes, about this text, that it is all about the gospel of Jesus and the good news he brings. The only thing you need in order to receive the gospel is to be dead. "You don't have to be smart. You don't have to be good. You don't have to be wise. You don't have to be wonderful. You don't have to be anything...you just have to be dead."<sup>1</sup> That is where the gospel does its work. The woman was regarded as dead and the daughter had died. The gospel comes to all who are dead and it gives the hope of life. That is the story. This is the story of how desperation moves from despair to faith and hope.

When we read these stories, many times we can become frustrated by our own experiences. We can recount our own moments of despair and wonder what we need to do to experience God's power in our situation. Some of us conclude that we must not be desperate enough. If somehow we could display more desperation, surely God would notice our plight. Others look at the words of Jesus and

see if we can find some type of magical saying that releases God's compassion and power. We think "Maybe we need more faith," "Maybe we need to say the right things," or "Maybe we need others to plead our case." Yet, I want to suggest to us today that these stories are not the story of someone's desperation releasing God's grace. This is a story about how desperation becomes hope because of God's grace. These stories are a reminder that the story is not about us; it is about Jesus. If the story is about Jesus, then what does desperation accompanied by faith produce in our lives?

It starts with humility. Because this is a story about Jesus, the characters exhibit neither arrogance nor entitlement but humility. Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, did not approach Jesus with entitlement but with humility. He bowed in Jesus' presence and his request was "Please", and he was pleading earnestly. The woman with the hemorrhage did not even want to call Jesus' attention to her. So, humility in the presence Jesus is the key.

When we find ourselves in moments of desperation, we do not fall into despair but we fall into humility. We realize in those moments that we are not entitled to God's power, but we are graced with God's presence and power. Now, don't get this wrong. Humility is not something that we choose so we might take step one to manipulate God's grace and power. It is just the opposite. The healing of the woman and the young girl remind us that Jesus is not being manipulated by humility. Humility is just a natural response when we realize who we are and who Jesus is. We really do not have any other proper response other than humility. It is the only way to approach Jesus. Desperation accompanied by faith's first step is humility.

The second characteristic that desperation and faith produce is persistence. Jairus heard his

daughter was dead on the way to his house. There were those who said "Give up. There is no use in bothering Jesus any more." But they persist and continue to the house. Likewise, the woman had 12 years of disappointment, but in her desperation that had become faith, she persisted. She reached and she reached until yes, she touched Jesus. Persistence is a quality that desperation accompanied by faith produces in our lives.

In my mind, persistent faith is the continual action of letting go and continuing to go on. Persistence in this passage is about letting go. When I say "letting go," I am talking about letting go of the burden. Jairus comes to Jesus and lets go by saying "If you will come and lay your hands on her, she will be healed." The woman is letting go by believing that all she needs is the touch of Jesus' garment. Letting go is the act of releasing the burden. Please understand that letting go of the burden does not always mean healing or solving of the problem, but it does mean we no longer suffer from under the weight of the matter. We let the burden-carrying go. We choose that we will not let the mental and emotional burden continue. We let go.

But we keep on going. Jairus kept on going. The woman kept on going. Desperation which is accompanied by faith means yes, we let go of the burden, but each day we keep on going even when everything is not resolved. We just get up and live with Jesus' presence even when the pain, the hurt, the obstacles, the bills, the uncertainty and the isolation are still there. We keep going. That is persistence. It is letting go of the burden-carrying; yet, we keep going even when there is no resolution, because we know Jesus goes with us.

The last characteristic of desperation that is accompanied not by despair but by faith is our confidence in Christ alone. This story is really not about the characters but about Jesus. Mark is not telling us



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that these people deserve God's healing more than others, he is not giving us a formula for our own desperation; rather, he is reminding us that God loves, and Jesus' compassion does not know boundaries. Mark is reminding us that Jesus loved the demonic in the graveyards in a Gentile land, and Jesus loved a ruler whose power had become useless. He loved an unnamed woman who had become just another overlooked person in the crowd of faces. Jesus is compassionate toward those who have someone to request for them and for those who request for themselves. Jesus is compassionate toward those who have been left for dead and those who are physically dying. This story is to remind us that we can have confidence in Jesus. Jesus does not have to be manipulated by our desperation to act on our behalf. Just the opposite is true. Jesus cares for us in our moments of desperation and our moments when we are not desperate.

Desperation does not have to be a reckless act as the result of deep despair. Desperation accompanied by faith can become the moment we realize that we are loved and cared for by God.

We come to the Lord's Table today and it too is a

place to remember God's compassion and grace. Some see the Table as the reminder of God's desperate act of the cross. However, the cross was not a desperate act but the act of a God who has always loved and cared for his creation. The Table is a place of humility. We humble ourselves at the Table as we are reminded of the grace we have been given through Jesus. We are reminded that Jesus humbled himself unto death on a cross. We too must live humble lives in the sight of God. The Table is a place of persistent release. At the Table we are reminded again of the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf. We keep coming back to the table because we need to be reminded over and over again of what God has done for us through Christ. The Table reminds us that yes, the victory over sin has been won and we can be forgiven, but we are reminded time and time again that we must choose to carry our cross daily and follow. The Table is also a place where we find our confidence in Jesus. It is at the Table that all of our own efforts of righteousness are put in perspective and we realize that our hope, our only hope, is Christ alone.

Desperation does not have to yield to despair. It can be an act of faith that produces humility, release and confidence in Christ. ✨

<sup>1</sup>Robert Farrar Capon, *Homiletics*, (June 2009) 72.

