

Sermon preached by  
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First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee  
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*Service of Light*  
Mark 5:21-43



He just wants his daughter to be healed. Jesus seems to want that as well, and so much more. The so much more is the thing in this text, and the thing we all pray for this Advent night.

We are met here on this dark Advent night by people longing for healing, dreaming of wholeness; we are met as a people who ourselves long and dream for healing and wholeness, seeking to be touched by the Spirit of Christ, daring to believe – to trust – as we walk.

Jairus is a leader in the synagogue, an important man, but he doesn't seem so important in this text. He is desperate. Having a daughter on the verge of death will do that to you. He calls her "my little daughter," my "talitha," in Arabic. We learn later that she is twelve, hardly little in those days, actually quite close to marrying age. But we know what he means. She may be fifty, but as long as she lives, she will be his talitha. And his talitha is sick, to the point of death. He is desperate, so desperate that he falls on his face, this leader of the synagogue, falls on his face at Jesus' feet and begs repeatedly for her life. Over and over and over, "My little daughter, my talitha, my little daughter, my talitha...come, lay your hands on her...my little daughter, my talitha..."

And yet, there is still time, still time before everything will change forever, still time before death has its way. Jairus believes this with the unyielding hope of a father: "Just come and lay your hands on her, and she will be made well, and live." There's a kind of abandon here, some may say undignified, some may say reckless. But, you tell me, what if it was your daughter? Your son? Your beloved?

My friend Mark is a chaplain at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. He says so many families come with their sick children, and they are begging, desperate, for a cure. It doesn't matter their social status – the children of celebrities are treated there alongside the children of the poor. But they are all one in their desperation, cutting across all the

lines that divide, all of them, crying out, “Come, lay your hands on her, that she may live”.

All of us would be reduced, as is Jairus, to mere beggars, up against that over which we have no control. He is willing to place his trust in this wandering preacher. While there is still hope, he will not rest in his efforts to get his daughter back from the brink of death. And so, off they go; the committed father and his last, best hope, rushing headlong into the crowd, toward the house where his talitha waits.

They are on the way, on their way to Jairus’ house. The crowd is pressing in on Jesus, and then we are introduced to this unnamed woman who has been suffering from hemorrhages. We learn she has endured much under many physicians. She has spent all she had and is no better, but rather worse.

This makes me think of Catherine, a friend of mine who was diagnosed with cancer. After getting multiple opinions, she underwent treatments and experienced some healing. Then when the cancer returned, she sought other opinions which lead to new treatments in another part of the country, and she again experienced some healing. Then when the cancer came back a third time, she sought some alternative treatments which took her overseas. She endured much under many physicians and she was no better, but rather worse.

Some of you can identify or empathize. You or someone you love is searching or has searched for healing. With each doctor’s appointment, there is a greater loss of control, greater frustration, greater disappointment, and then that steady loss of hope turns to despair. In these situations, we realize what we already know but for some reason often forget. We remember that we are not in control, but thankfully, God longs for us to ask for help. God longs for us to realize we are not supposed to live this life in isolation trying to make everything better by ourselves. We are called to live in union with God, to live in community.

This unnamed woman in the text has heard of Jesus. She has only heard of him, but simply in the hearing, she has enough courage to make herself vulnerable and risk being seen in public. She has been hemorrhaging for 12 years, which is the same number of years that Jairus’ little daughter has been alive. With this condition, she is considered unclean and a social outcast. She has been without her community, not allowed to even enter the synagogue, and is living in isolation.

Countless people are touching Jesus. All these people are pressing in, trying to be as close to Jesus as possible, but this woman approaches Jesus differently. She is very

intentional. I picture her covered from head to toe so no one will recognize her. She is trying very hard not to be seen or known for it says she “came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak.” She doesn’t approach Jesus from the front, fall on the ground and beg for healing like Jairus. Instead, she comes from behind hoping not to be noticed.

She believes healing will occur by simply touching his clothes, just the very fringe of his garment. She makes her way through the crowd to Jesus, scared but hopeful, and finally gets close enough to reach out in faith. Immediately, after touching Jesus’ clothes, her hemorrhage stops and she feels in her body that she is healed of her disease.

We then learn that Jesus is also immediately aware that power has gone forth from him and asks “Who touched me?” Can you imagine the scene? Think of a celebrity trying to walk down the street with countless fans pressing in. The disciples are kind of like the security guards. They are trying to help Jesus move as fast as he can to the home of Jairus as people are pressing in from all sides.

In the midst of all the chaos, Jesus asks “Who touched me?” You can understand why the disciples balk at the question. A more logical question isn’t who touched him but who hasn’t touched him? As everyone else is questioning Jesus, the women knew exactly what he was asking, and instead of feeling the joy and elation from being healed, she is filled with fear and trembling. With all those emotions, she then falls down before Jesus and tells him the whole truth.

What is the whole truth? Is it the story of her physical issues? Partly, but the whole truth is so much more. She believes she can be made well by simply touching Jesus’ clothes, but Mark doesn’t tell us she was made well from the touch. It says she was healed of her disease. The heart of this passage is in Jesus’ response to her. “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

Death interrupts. Messengers from Jairus’s house come, interrupting Jesus’ pronouncement of healing with dreaded news that his talitha has not been healed: “Why bother the Teacher any further?”

But Jesus interrupts them, interrupts the words of death with a word of life, calling Jairus out as he did the unnamed woman who touched him: “Do not fear. Only believe.” And now, legs wobbly with fear, speechless with terror, he follows. It is hard to imagine that the fear leaves him; at least it is for me, as a father, hard to imagine that Jairus was able to trade in his terror at that moment for any other emotion. But he does manage, somehow, to put one foot in front of the other. He follows Jesus to that place where the

worst has happened. That following, in the midst of pain and fear, that giving up and giving over to Jesus, is the essence of trust, the essence of faith, there is so much more that Jesus wants for him, and for us all.

He hears his own words of desperation echoed back to him as words of hope, life, and wholeness, as Jesus takes his little one by the hand and says, “Talitha cum,” “little girl, get up!”

And she does. Jesus brings the little daughter back to life just after the unclean woman is healed and then made well. Did you notice there are two separate and distinct results? One is being healed and the other is being made well. Being healed of a disease seems pretty straight forward, but what does being made well mean?

Touch seems to be a key part of being made well. Jairus begs Jesus to come and lay hands on his daughter, and when they arrive, Jesus takes her by the hand. The unclean woman touches Jesus clothes and is healed of her disease. As I have lived with this text, I have reflected on what does this look like today. How can we be made well by Jesus’ touch?

Then I read a commentary by Eduard Schweizer that put words to what I was feeling. He writes, “in the act of healing itself nothing important has happened unless there is a personal encounter with Jesus.”<sup>1</sup> The woman was healed of her disease by touching Jesus’ clothes, but it isn’t until the personal encounter with Jesus that she is made well.

It is not just the touch alone that healed in this story. It is the woman’s faith that healed her through touching Jesus’ clothes, and it was her faith through the personal encounter with Jesus, through dialogue with Jesus, that made her well and brought the wholeness beyond healing. We can all have personal encounters with Christ. We can be in dialogue with Christ every day through prayer, through Scripture, through acknowledging God in the beauty of this earth, and through conversations with one another. It is through these personal encounters with Jesus that we are made well.

God wants us all to be made well. God wants us to enter into the wholeness that God continually desires for us. It is a gift that God freely gives. Jesus continues the message of welcoming all to God’s family by addressing the woman as daughter. By simply calling her daughter, Jesus is casting the net wider, and he is bringing her into the community. Jesus came for all and brings grace and wholeness for all.

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<sup>1</sup>Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1970), 117-18.

Not every person who seeks physical healing receives it. Both of these daughters will eventually die. My friend, Catherine, didn't receive the physical healing she had hoped, but her faith radiated from her. She trusted God with all her heart and as a result, she reflected God's light and love on all she encountered before she was diagnosed, during her battle, and in the end. She experienced the touch that was at the heart of this passage through personal encounters with the Risen Christ, and she was continually made well through those encounters even when she was not experiencing physical healing.

Frederick Buechner has such a way with words and in his book *Wishful Thinking*, he says, "The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you. There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too."<sup>2</sup>

Our prayer for you this night is that you will receive the gift of reaching out to take it and in the receiving and reaching, you, those you love, and this world that God loves will be made well. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993)