

“Do Not Fear – Only Believe”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Mark 5: 21-43

What do you pray for? A new job for you, a friend, or a family member? Improved health for yourself or someone you love? A sense of direction or purpose for a child who is struggling with what to do next in his or her life? An end to violence in our neighborhood, our city, our nation, our world?

After the electrical storm we had last weekend, and all the things that keep needing to be repaired and/or replaced, I am praying for no complications when it comes to filing an insurance claim at some point this summer!

I learned this week that a couple who are close friends of ours are expecting their first child in January. She was in the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program with me five years ago, and we are still very close to her and her husband. They have struggled with fertility for many years, and so to get her email this week that they are pregnant brought tears to my eyes. I am praying fervently for them in the months ahead, and that all will go smoothly and healthily for them and their child.

In the midst of so many changes taking place in our society and our community, I am constantly praying for wisdom, guidance, and discernment, both as a pastor and as a Christian. Sometimes, as I am tackling a to-do list or planning for the future or addressing the latest crisis, I can find myself searching for affirmation, asking God for direction, wondering if I need to take a different track. It seems a lot of the prayers I offer for myself include asking: “God, am I on the right path here?”

Maybe your prayers are similar to mine, or maybe they include other areas of petition. Often, our prayers will fall into one of these two categories: for others or for ourselves. Because we are in relationship with family, friends, strangers, other human beings, we pray for their health, safety, security, and well-being. Because we are individually children of God, we pray for our health, safety, security, and well-being. We pray to God because we believe God will listen to us, will act on our behalf, and will bring wholeness and healing where otherwise there is brokenness and pain. We are often motivated to pray because we are uncertain of what else to do, and seek divine intervention in a seemingly hopeless situation.

The passage we have read this morning shares the story of two individuals who are seeking divine intervention in what appears to be a hopeless situation. While neither of these healing stories involve prayer per se, they certainly relate to our human desire to call on God to act in a positive, restorative way. Interestingly enough, each of these represent the earlier distinctions we mentioned about who we pray for: Jairus is seeking healing for

his daughter, and a woman is seeking healing for her 12 years of suffering from hemorrhages. And in both cases, Jesus does not turn them away, but offers words of hope: "Do not fear, only believe."

It's interesting how one healing interrupts the other healing in this passage. We begin with Jesus responding to Jairus' plea to come and heal his daughter who is critically ill. As he is walking with the crowds of people to Jairus' house, the woman who has suffered with hemorrhages for twelve years desperately seeks Jesus' healing touch. Her hand touches Jesus' garment, and that simple action heals her of her affliction.

I love Jesus' reaction; it reminds me of a parent who knows something has happened with a child: "Who touched my clothes?" And note that the woman does not disappear into the crowd, does not retreat into anonymity. She steps forward – albeit "in fear and trembling" – and admits to him the whole truth. Perhaps Jesus' affirmation is not only for her faith, but also for her honesty: "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

By the time Jesus has finished with the woman, we learn that Jairus' daughter has run out of time: "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" That would be the normal human response, wouldn't it? It's clear that the illness has run its course. There is no need to bother this great man of God any further – he could not do anything for the little girl now. Let him go and begin the grieving process for the child.

But Jesus will not accept what the world sees, and he turns that perspective on its head with God's grace. He tells them the child is not dead but is sleeping. The world does not see that and laughs in his face. Jesus sends the crowds out, and with Jairus and his wife, stands beside the girl's bed. He takes her hand, says, "Little girl, get up!" and she promptly stands up and walks around the room. Jairus' prayers had been answered, and Jesus shows the world that only God will have the final word.

And yet, how do we react when our prayers to God don't turn out as well as the woman or Jairus' daughter? How is our faith shaken when all we see is continued violence and poverty and hopelessness around us? How are we supposed to approach not only prayer, but also our mission into the world, if things don't appear to be the way we want them to?

Michael Lindvall writes the following: I have a friend, a man of deep faith, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease when he was still in his fifties. He and his wife prayed that he might be healed. Twenty years later, he is in the last debilitating stages of the disease. Nevertheless, he once told me that his prayers had been answered. He said in all sincerity, "I have been healed, not of Parkinson's disease, but I have been healed of my fear of Parkinson's disease." These two biblical healing stories (from Mark) in which people turn to Jesus for healing will raise the question, "Does prayer work?" If we mean by this, "Do you get what you pray for?" the honest answer will be, "Sometimes, but not always." Pray as they may, [we all] know that all prayers are not answered as we pray them.

It may be helpful to remember that prayers for healing are not simply utilitarian. That is to say, prayer is not simply a matter of bending the vector of divine will toward my will, my needs, and my hopes. More profoundly, to ask something of God is to edge into deeper relationship with God. God's mind may or may not be changed, but I – my mind and heart – may be (Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 188-190).

The phrase that speaks to me most deeply out of this passage is Jesus' words to Jairus, when he learns his daughter has already died: "Do not fear, only believe." When our prayers are not seemingly answered, we can fall into fear. When it feels like hope has gone, we can drown in anxiety. When the troubles of this world seem to be insurmountable, we might decide enough is enough, and refuse to reach out to help, to love, to serve.

In those moments, Jesus says: "Do not fear, only believe." Do not allow fear to take over your worldview. Do not fear the unknown. Do not fear what the world tells you to fear. Believe. Believe that you can draw closer to God through your prayer life. Believe that your heart and mind can be changed by God's grace. Believe that the world does not have the final word – only God has the final word.

To the mother who is in fear for her life from domestic violence: "Do not fear, only believe."

To the man who does not know what God still wants him to do after experiencing so much physical adversity: "Do not fear, only believe."

To the teenager who is struggling with his or her identity and what might come next: "Do not fear, only believe."

To the church that is faced with ministering to a community that is constantly changing yet with incredible potential: "Do not fear, only believe."

As we live out our calling to be a disciple of the one who heals the body, mind, and soul, may we always remain open to what God has to say to us. And through our worship, our prayers, our service, may we never allow fear to have the last word; may we trust and believe in the one who heals, who saves, and who redeems us all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.