Just Believe

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 9:18-26

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When our son Andrew was young, he was both strong-willed and cautious. What a lethal combination! Some of you who know Andrew might be surprised to know that he was cautious as a child, given how adventuresome he has become in his adult years. But as a child he was hesitant about trying new things. As parents, we would forever try to coax him into taking swimming lessons or going to summer camp or trying a new sport. It wasn’t easy given how strong-willed he could become. Sometimes it became a battle of wills. I would become so exasperated with him that I would get in his face and say, “Trust me. I want you to try this. If you don’t like this new thing after giving it your best shot, you can quit. I’m not able to explain it to you at the moment, but I have your best interests at heart. Trust me in this.”

You know something? He almost always liked it. He never quit.

There are times when God tells us in so many words. “Trust me. I can’t explain it to you right now but I have your best interests at heart. Trust me in this.”

Today’s Scripture lesson is a story in trust. Can I trust Jesus when the events in my life don’t make sense?

Patrick read for you this morning the abridged version of this story from Matthew’s gospel. Actually, this story is told for us in three gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. There are a typical number of minor discrepancies in the way the story is told in these gospels, such as you might expect with various eyewitneses. Since the account in Luke is the most expansive, I’ll retell the story from Luke’s point of view.

Jesus and his disciples have crossed the Sea of Galilee. They are met by a crowd of admirers and people desperate for a cure. The leader of the local synagogue, named Jairus, steps forward and falls at Jesus’ feet. He begs Jesus on behalf of his 12-year-old daughter who is gravely ill. Luke
doesn’t record Jesus’ response but he seems eager and willing to go with Jairus to visit his daughter.

There is also in the crowd that day a woman who has been bleeding for 12 miserable years. She has tried every cure known to man, but nothing has worked. These failed treatments have left her utterly destitute.

By rights, she shouldn’t even be there since this hemorrhaging renders her ceremoniously unclean (Leviticus 15:19-30). She’s forbidden to step foot inside a synagogue. Everything she touches is unclean. Everybody who touches her is unclean.

She resolves to position herself to touch Jesus as he passes. Just a touch, she figures. No one else will ever have to know. When she touches his robe her bleeding stops. Instantly, she knows that she has been healed.

Jesus halts the procession and says the words she fears most. “Who touched me?” His disciples react with understandable surprise. “Master, what do you mean, Who touched me?” Everybody is touching you” (8:45).

“No,” Jesus insists, “Someone has touched me; for I know that power has gone out of me” (8:46). Jesus is somehow able to discriminate an anxious tug of faith from contact with a jostling crowd.

This bleeding woman had hoped to be healed incognito, but now her cover is blown. She steps forward trembling and confesses her deed. She expects condemnation. Shame has done a number on her.

What Jesus says next rocks her world, “Daughter, your faith has healed you” (8:48). Jesus could have allowed this healing to be their little secret. Yet, if Jesus had not called her out, it might have taken a lifetime to overcome the stigma that has built up over the years. Jesus not only heals her bleeding, he heals her shame.
Meanwhile Jairus, remember Jairus with the acutely ill daughter, is told the fateful news: “Your daughter is dead; don’t trouble the teacher any longer” (8:49).

Jesus overhears the news and states, “Do not fear; only believe” (8:50). It strikes me as rather insensitive for Jesus to talk this way. I would have thought the words “I’m terribly sorry for your loss,” would have been more appropriate.

The entourage arrives at Jairus’ home. The mourners have already assembled to begin their wailing. Jesus asks, “Why are you weeping? This child is not dead, she is sleeping.” Yeah right, sleeping! Real funny, Jesus!

Jesus orders everyone out of the room except his three disciples. He takes the little girl by the hand saying, “Talitha Cumi,” which in Aramaic means, “Little girl, get up.” She opens her eyes and Jesus directs his startled disciples to give her something to eat. He tells everyone to keep quiet about what has happened. A lot of good that will do! News of Jesus raising a dead girl to life again will spread like wildfire!

On the surface, these two people couldn’t be more different. They seem like polar opposites. Jairus is a leader about town. He directs worship at the local synagogue, the most important institution in the community. He is well-known and socially prominent.

The woman, on the other hand, is a “nobody.” Her illness prevents her from worship at the synagogue. She has been ostracized from Jewish society. She has been labeled “unclean. She is classified an untouchable.

Yet, they share one thing in common. Jairus and this woman are desperate. They are both desperate for a cure.
Jesus says to the woman, “Daughter, your faith has healed you” (8:48). They are the identical words Jesus speaks to another woman labeled an outsider in Luke’s gospel, “Daughter, your faith has healed you” (7:50). Later in Luke’s gospel, Jesus says to a blind man, “Receive your sight, your faith has healed you” (18:42).

What does Jesus mean, “Your faith has healed you”? I mean, who are we kidding? Their faith didn’t heal them. Jesus healed them!

Jesus could have performed these two healings without any effort on their part. But Jesus wants some reciprocity here. He wants them to be invested in their healing.

Jairus and this woman bring something to the table. They want to be healed. Jairus asks, even begs to be healed. This woman takes a big risk in touching Jesus.

While they supply the faith, Jesus supplies the power. Their healing is totally Jesus’ prerogative and his call. You could say that Jesus supplies the power and we supply the faith.

Jesus says to this bleeding woman, “Daughter, your faith has healed you” (8:48). He says something comparable to Jairus: “Do not fear; only believe.” The words “faith” and “belief” originate from the same Greek term. It’s a word meaning trust. Trust me, Jesus says. I have your best interests at heart. Trust me in this. Trust becomes a catalyst in this story for Jesus to work miracles.

So, how much trust do we need to exercise for Jesus to do his special work? In the gospels, Jesus works with trust in whatever measure it appears. The two people in our story are hardly exemplary believers. They
don’t receive healing because they are exceptional disciples. Yet, they have trust enough for Jesus to do what he does best.

Some of you have a hard time putting your trust in God. You asked God for help in the past but nothing happened. You begged God for intervention but were sorely disappointed.

Actor Tim Allen’s father died when Tim was 11 years of age. A drunk driver crashed into the family car, which claimed the life of his dad. Tim has never gotten over this accident that occurred 50 years ago. Nearly a half century later, Tim acknowledges his father’s death changed his life forever. “I asked God, ‘Do you think this is necessary?’ I’ve had a tumultuous relationship with my creator ever since.”

Why do some things happen as they do? Why didn’t God restrain Dylann Roof from killing nine people at a church Bible study in Charleston? Why God, why?

Scripture asserts time and again that God’s ways are not our ways. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Can we trust God when life doesn’t make sense? Did the virgin birth make sense to Joseph? Did the beheading of John the Baptist make sense to Jesus disciples? Did the cross make sense to anyone at the time?

God tells us in every conceivable way in Scripture, ‘Trust me. I can’t explain it to you right now but I have your best interests at heart. Trust me in this.’
Maybe you’re enjoying life at the moment and don’t really need God all that much. You’d rather keep Jesus on retainer for the times when you really need him. Let’s be honest! We’re only one crisis away from being as desperate as the people in our story. Life is so very fragile.

Others of us may find ourselves in a difficult place. We may be getting hammered right now by events beyond our control. God, don’t you care? Can’t you make my life just a little bit better?

Trust me. I can’t explain it to you right now in a way that makes sense to you but I have your best interests at heart. Trust me in this!