

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

PETER J. VIBERT, PASTOR

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Mark 5:21-43

"Two Daughters"

Jesus proclaimed the arrival of "the kingdom of God," and invited everyone who heard him to turn away from their preoccupations with revolt against Roman occupation, their desire to purify the nation, their longing for a king who would finally end their long exile, and to put their trust in him as God's Messiah. That appeal cut right across the social and religious spectrum of 1st C. Israel, and called in people from all parts of society to join his new community that was to be shaped by love, forgiveness, equality before God, and concern for the least and the lost.

As his group of true disciples grew – never many more than 100 people, despite the very large crowds that gathered to see and hear him – they began to reflect the principle that Paul would later describe as "neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, but all one in Christ Jesus." It wasn't that distinctions totally disappeared, but they became relativised, transcended, irrelevant in his kingdom. What united them beyond all normal social bonds was their trust in Jesus – that he was the one to end Israel's true exile in sin; that he had authority to by-pass the Temple and the sacrificial system and himself pronounce forgiveness; that he knew what was truly clean and unclean in God's eyes – matters of the heart and not of externals. The new community – the true

Israel – would be bound together by faith in Jesus, belief in him, trust in him, following his ways.

1) People In Need

So in Mark 5 we meet two "daughters," and two pictures of the faith that brought very diverse people into Jesus' community. They are also in many ways surprising images of how Jesus responds to different expressions of need and faith.

Jairus is probably the president of his synagogue, and a respected member of the community. He is one of the few members of the "Jewish establishment" who has a positive encounter with Jesus. He comes to Jesus because he already recognizes his authority and power. Jairus' 12-year old daughter is dying. We are not told what her disease was, and Jesus does not ask. But Jairus is clear that Jesus can help: "Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." Jesus immediately responds to Jairus' faith in him and sets out for the house.

There are crowds, of course. Many people have heard of or watched Jesus the great healer and exorcist and teacher, and they want to see what he will do next. In the

crowd there is a woman. Unlike Jairus the president, she is an outcast from the synagogue, "unclean" because she has suffered from what is very likely vaginal bleeding for 12 years. No doctor has been able to help her, her money is gone, and she is only getting worse. But she has heard about Jesus, and she is desperate to get close to him. Her "faith" in him is almost superstitious; she believes that if she can just touch his clothes, she can be healed. She is fearful, she does not want anyone to know what she is doing; but when she succeeds in reaching out for the tassels of Jesus' robe and realizes that at that moment she is healed, she is suddenly confronted by his demand to know who touched him.

Jesus' disciples ridicule his question, but the woman knows she must now come into the open. She risks trouble from the religious authorities for being in a public place and potentially "defiling" other people. Even by her own lights, she has probably "defiled a holy man" by touching him. But Jesus draws her, trembling and fearful and no doubt tearful, to confess her strange faith and actions. He does not deride her, but instead calls her "daughter," and tells her that because of her faith, she is now made whole again. It is not a magical effect of power flowing through his clothes, but *her faith* that has made her well. She can now go on with her life in peace – the *shalom* and wholeness that God alone can give – and because she is "whole," she can re-enter society, attend synagogue, become the "daughter of Abraham" that she is by right.

She is a reminder to us that faith is not always well-informed or articulate or accurate; that at times it is not much more than a desperate and intuitive sense that *Jesus is the one to turn to*. Her fear, her trembling, her confession are the marks of many a conversion, and a typical emotional response to Jesus' call in people who have

lived with suffering, pain and a sense of being "an outsider." To be welcomed and affirmed by the love and grace of Jesus – especially if you are a woman – to know that you can be "made whole" again; is to release torrents of emotion that have built up inside over many years.

But we must return to Jairus and his daughter. Jesus has been delayed on the way to his house. Now comes the message that the girl has died. It is all too late! Did Jairus mutter to himself "that woman, taking up his time!"? What did he think of the woman whose bleeding stopped Jesus healing his daughter? Does her gain mean his loss? His combination of anger and grief could easily have overwhelmed him, as it might any of us in that situation, were it not for Jesus' reassurance: "Don't be afraid; keep on believing." But how do you trust Jesus when someone you love has just died, and you're sure it could have been prevented?

Jairus keeps on believing, and his faith is rewarded. Jesus ignores the reports of the death, he dismisses the wailing of the mourners – people then and now in the Middle East deal with death much more loudly than we do – and insists that the girl "is sleeping." They know she is dead, but Jesus knows that "death is just a sleep" to anyone who knows about resurrection. In a tender moment, we hear the very words of Jesus in Aramaic: *talitha koum* – literally, "little lamb, get up!" – and she does! There is power in Jesus words; the dead do not raise themselves. We can imagine the feelings in that room: tears from her mother, astonishment from Peter, James and John, and amazement and heartfelt thanks and devotion from Jairus to the man who has restored his daughter to him. You know that this family will be disciples of Jesus forever!

Who or what needs healing in your life, or in your family's? Are you, perhaps, a respected, proud but fearful father (or mother), wondering about the future of your children? Is there someone you love who has been secretly ill for a long time? What about the ones who have spent all their time and money on physicians and are no better? The ones who are afraid of what lies ahead of them? The ones who live "on the outside" of life, outside normal community, outside the church, almost outside of your family?

Perhaps they are people with little interest in God, with little or no faith. Then come to Jesus and pray for them yourself. Jairus' *daughter* had no faith, but her father did, and Jesus responded to it and rewarded it. Jairus must have doubted, but he "kept on believing," kept on trusting Jesus, even when it seemed it was all too late and things were hopeless - and his daughter was restored to him. The woman who couldn't stop bleeding was superstitious in her faith, but that didn't stop Jesus healing her.

Jesus deals kindly with all kinds of people, and all kinds of flimsy faith - which is just as well, because that is the only kind of faith that most of us have! We are all hugely ignorant of the ways of God, and what it truly means to trust him. But the issue in these stories, and in our story, is not how great or accurate or steadfast or doubt-free our faith is, but how great is Jesus the Savior. We are not called to trust in "our faith," but to *trust in Jesus* and in the power of God that worked in him and works in us by his Spirit.

So the two daughters' stories should teach us that with Jesus, it is "never too late." Even when humanly speaking there is no hope - from the doctors, from medicine - even when things have gone on so long that we cannot imagine now that they can be ever be reversed, even when we are sure that things

have passed the "point of no return," we still cannot know what God can do. Restoration, wholeness, are still possible. And even when death comes, to those who know and trust Jesus and the power of his resurrection, there is the deep reassurance that we, or this loved one of ours are "asleep" - at peace in the presence of the Lord, ready for the day when all will be made whole; when we will "awake" to be transformed and re-clothed with bodies that are incorruptible!

We should learn too that anyone can be included in Jesus' kingdom: whether you are a president or a child or an outcast woman, faith alone is what brings you in and keeps you in. And the woman who bled and was healed should perhaps also remind us that just as, before God's eyes, there are no secret sins, there are also no secret acts of faith. What we try to hide out of fear or even out of humility, God knows - and will one day draw out into the light.

And we ought to learn that when we are in deep need, we should turn to Jesus. Even if we have only heard what to us are barely credible stories about how he deals with other people; even if we have tried everything else and it has not succeeded, and he is our "last resort," we should not fear to come to him and ask his help. He rewards the faith of those who come to him - faith is the one thing that pleases God above all else; indeed we are told that "without it, we cannot please God."

Matthew Henry, the Puritan pastor who in 1710 wrote a famous commentary on the whole Bible, said of the woman in this passage: "It is usual with people not to apply themselves to Christ, until they have tried in vain all other helpers... but he is a sure refuge even to them who make him their last refuge."

Even if you or your loved ones are at the end of your ropes, Jesus responds to faith, however limited and fearful. If we truly put our trust in him, we can be sure he will do what is ultimately best for us, and will welcome into his kingdom anyone who is ready to trust him in sickness and in health, in life and in death.

Let us pray...