

“Different Approaches In Faith: The Same God”

Mark 5:21-43

July 23rd, 2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Earlier this month, we spent time working on this text with the two healing stories from Jesus’ life.¹ We may remember this passage was part of the collected stories about Jesus that were orally recited in the early church during the thirty-some years after Jesus resurrection before the Biblical texts were written.² But taking a different approach, let’s reflect on the people who approached Jesus – looking for miraculous healing.

One of the things so appealing about these two healing stories is that we can easily identify with the characters. Jairus, being the President of a local Jewish school and temple,³ would be similar, in our culture, to an Elder who would be chair of a Methodist church board.⁴ He was a respected community leader, so well known in that community, that Mark mentioned him by name some thirty years after it happened.

¹ By this point, no one had taken the time to write a biography of Jesus because most everyone was well-familiar with the orally-circulated stories of His life. Most every church leader fully expected Jesus to return soon. After all, Jesus had said that this is the end times and He would return unexpectedly – as surprisingly as “a thief in the night.” But Jesus didn’t return as expected. In Mark’s gospel, he transcribes two collections of oral tradition about Jesus. That is, he included two sets of stories people had memorized and we can see they are units by their structure. One of these sets of stories would be recited in a communion meal. One section begins at Mark 4:35 and the other at 6:45. They both have similar elements. Each section begins with a miracle story about Jesus (that happened near a body of water. Next, there is mention of Jesus preaching to the crowds. There are three healings and finally, each section ends with Jesus miraculously feeding thousands of people. See my summary on how the New Testament came to be compiled at: <http://www.connectedness.org/FromJesusToNTWritings.html>

² And a quick look over at the Matthew and Luke columns shows the others had shorter renderings. Jesus had just returned from the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee and had entered a Jewish town. As Mark’s verse 21 shows, a crowd gathered around Him, and verse 24 says it was a great crowd.

³ called a synagogue

⁴ Methodist is picked because Presbyterian boards (the Session) are moderated by clergy.

By now, Jesus was widely known to be a powerful miracle worker and prophet. Jairus knew all about Him. As He came to Jesus, visibly distressed and falling to his knees, he dramatically pleaded for the healing of his daughter. His daughter was dying and he was desperate.

In asking Jesus to place His hands on his daughter, it’s clear he believed that healings took place in that way, or he had heard or even seen Jesus healing people by laying His hands on them. Either way, Jairus firmly believed that Jesus had the power to heal and so he assertively, directly and boldly asked for help. To do that, Jairus had **knowledge** of Jesus and His power. He and his wife faced the urgent need to have their daughter saved from death so he **pursued** Jesus.

What a contrast to the approach of the woman who had suffered for over a decade with a hemorrhage. If we pause, for a moment, we can sense the brilliance behind telling these two stories back-to-back as they represent a wonderful contrast of characters. The woman came to Jesus for healing with anything but an assertive and direct approach.

You already know, from your lifetime of Bible study and Sunday sermons, of the life that woman had experienced. You know, for instance, that in the first century Jewish culture, women were considered objects – owned by men and they were never to approach a man in public for any reason. You already know that the priesthood had created a rigorous religious classification scheme defining everything by their “holiness code.” Anything the least bit different was ruled as “unholy” and that list included many foods, animals, people and people’s ailments.

You know this woman, with a chronic bleeding problem, may also have been a hemophiliac. Through no choice of her own, she was a social pariah. She was undoubtedly anemic, subject to infections, and was probably dying of complications resulting from her body’s inability to fight off an invading disease. Mark even added the detail that she had lost all her money and her condition had been made worse by incompetent doctors.

The woman's medical problems had also caused her to be ostracized by her society. She had fallen between the cracks of a society with no public-assistance or Medicaid. There were no 12 step help-groups available for her tragic life. Today, she would be equivalent to someone who is dying on one of the back wards of Buffalo General with no health insurance and no money to consult with a medical specialist (who would aggressively treat her had she come from the ranks of the well-heeled from the suburbs).

When she approached Jesus, she didn't say a word. She didn't write a note, discretely asking someone to pass it to Him. She crept up from behind – from the anonymity of the crowd that was following Him to Jairus' home.

To make matters worse, she got caught – right there in front of the whole crowd. The famous Healer, Whom everyone in town was following, abruptly stopped to figure out who had touched Him (on His way to see this very important person's ailing daughter). Everything in her life had gone wrong up to that point and now she was going to be publicly humiliated.

Fortunately Jesus compassionately called her "daughter" as she trembled in the sand at His feet. He praised her faith that had pursued her healing.

As timid as she had been, like the Synagogue President, she also had the **knowledge** of Who Jesus was and what He could do. She also had some wherewithal to **pursue** Jesus and to risk breaking those horrible judging social and religious taboos about "un-cleanliness" as she reached out to touch the hem of His cloak. However desperate she was, she took the risk, reached out and sought God's help.

We can't help but remember one other person, not included in this passage, who reached out in faith for God's help.⁵ This was the Roman Centurion who sent a messenger to Jesus, asking Him to just command the healing of his servant (without bothering to enter his home). He was someone in a position of power and responsibility and was used to delegating tasks to others. He **knew** and **assumed**

Jesus to be able to do the same and **pursued** the healing.

This man's faith so "amazed" Jesus, (*imagine Jesus being amazed*), that He turned to the crowd (witnessing His exchange with the messengers), declaring, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." The clincher being that not only did this guy have faith enough to ask Him to heal by remote control – He was a Gentile, for goodness sake.

Now at this point, well into the last half of our lifespan, we've read or seen just about everything in how people approach God. Besides all the unusual stories – from near-death miraculous healings to groups of fanatics dressed in white robes waiting on the rooftops for the so-called "Second Coming" – it comes down to this. Inside, each of us ponder, "How have I approached God, in faith, in my life?"

I don't know about each of you, but I've pretty much taken God for granted throughout my life. I had a pleasant enough childhood and youth, having lived with all of the blessings (and little of the disadvantages) of our affluent American culture. I've been generally grateful for the blessings I've received through the years, but I haven't yet found myself in such dire need as these folks mentioned in the Bible. *So most of the time*, through the years, I've approached God with more of a *casual* sense of tossing my requests to God. Through the years, my attitude would be, "Say God, if You get a chance, would Ya take a look at this relationship (or circumstance) I'm facing and lend a hand? I'd like for it to work out a little better than the way it's going right now."

Of course, when you and I have faced some emotionally and mentally *traumatic* situations, we've been anything but casual. "Blessed are those who know they need God – *theirs* is the kingdom," Jesus put it one day. But you know from your experiences and those of your friends and relatives, each one of us approaches God in our own way.

Some of us, like the woman, are timid. We don't think too much of ourselves and the importance of our life and situation is, somehow, not even measurable compared to some well-known politician, movie star or famous national leader. So we are generally resigned to whatever our plight might be – we don't

⁵ Luke 7:1-10

even bother asking God to help us. Perhaps we feel we're not worth God's time, so why ask?

Others of us are more assertive. "God, get me out of this and I mean now! This isn't right. It isn't fair. Good people are suffering and Ya' gotta' do something and I mean it!"

And then there's the bargaining. Have you ever asked God for something and offered to sweeten the deal by promising something (*that you should be doing anyway*) if God will do what you want? You know, like promising to go to church or vowing to stop doing some other unhealthy behavior if God will fix this or that?

Then there is the hodgepodge of mixed motives we have behind our asking God for things and trying to do "our part" in bringing about good or healing. Although God knows our hearts and our occasionally stupid motives of selfishness, amazingly, God works with us anyway. The most impressive thing about what Jesus has shown us about God, is that God isn't (at all) fooled by us. God knows our minds and hearts and sees the best and the worst of us coming a mile away – and yet is crazy about us anyway.

No matter how assertively or passively; . . . no matter how knowledgeably or simple-mindedly we come to God, God doesn't change.

Neither is Christianity a managed-faith-care provider. God doesn't treat us according to the formulary or the book – we're loved as deeply and as compassionately as we love our own children and grandchildren.

Of course you and I have been approaching God with pretty much all the blinders we were given by other fearful Christians in our youth. Most of us have been carrying around this phantom voice that has been whispering to us, all our lives, about 'probably not being good enough to deserve God's love.' The words to the old hymns have done a job on our having a healthy sense of our worth in God's eyes. Most of us have been dragging this long sack over our shoulder, containing all the things we've done wrong and all the things we've never accomplished in our lives – all the things we are not.

Well here's the shocker. It doesn't matter how we approach to God. God already knows our need, whether we are too timid to state it or we are so full of ourselves to even remember God is beside us. No

matter what our spiritual condition, God already knows what is haunting us and what is absolutely shredding our spirits.

Frankly put by Paul, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, Who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."⁶

And no way is God so capricious and vein that if we don't formally ask for help, God just won't help us. (As if to suggest that God is standing by us and all our suffering and waiting for us to say the word before helping.) In fact, humanity *didn't* ask, but God sent Jesus into our presence, anyway, to help us out – to give us direction and healing – at an ominous cost. Look Who was *already* within arm's reach, or within walking distance or within range of messenger service when those three individuals asked for help.

One lesson we can come to, then, is that maybe it isn't as important *how* we approach God as it is that we do so – mindful that God is right beside us. Perhaps all we need to do is have the **faith** and the **knowledge** that the One, (Who made and loves us), is already beside us. We only need the **knowledge** and the **trust**, that right when we *feel* that all is lost and we are hopelessly damned to bleak suffering, loneliness and despair – we can **refocus on God's presence** and quietly turn to God for help.

So it doesn't depend just on you – because by now, you already know it's been out of your control for a long time. It doesn't depend just on the people you presently see in your life – because by now, you know they haven't been able to affect a change by this point. Instead, it depends on God and that is enough.

Have hope in what you already know about God. Trust and put your faith in God. Your life and experiences are not meaningless. God cares and *will* act.

So after you've done all you can, wait. Live mindfully **in the moment** and don't get caught up (and tied up in knots) in **the future of "what-ifs."**

⁶ Romans 8:26-27 (NRSV version)

Live purposefully in the present and don't get trapped in **the past of "what could have been."**

You've already sent out your messengers.
You've already reached out your hand in the crowd.
But God is here, now. It's time to trust. ■

