

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
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Mark 5:21-43

Faith or Desperation?

Faith or desperation? Faith or desperation? When do you come to God?

Both of the stories contained within today's rather long reading from the Gospel of Mark are pretty well-known. The woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. And the temple leader whose daughter was deathly ill. You may have studied these verses in Sunday School, Bible Study, and I know you have heard sermons preached about them since they have been part of the three-year lectionary set of readings that have been read for decades in Christian churches.

Let's take a look at them again.

So, tell me: what drove each of these people to seek Jesus out? What motivated the woman? What motivated the temple leader? Let's think about this: what is the difference between the way the woman with the long-term hemorrhage sought out Jesus and the way in which the temple leader sought out Jesus?

We might say that one sought Jesus out in desperation (the temple leader) and the other sought Jesus out because of her strong faith. Okay, we'll come back to this discussion. Let's talk about privilege for a minute. Who assumed they had privilege in these stories—the temple leader or the woman? Why do you think one felt he had the privilege to openly seek out Jesus and request his presence at his daughter's side? Why did the woman almost secretly try to simply touch Jesus?

So, this begs the question: who in our culture today has or think they have inherent privilege?

(Possible: white people? Rich people? Politicians? Who else?)

Okay, let's sum up what we have discussed.

We have two people. I think we can agree that both of these folks, the woman and the temple leader, were both people of faith, right? While the story of the

woman is often preached about as an example of amazing faith, which certainly is, couldn't she also, after twelve years of bleeding, which may have put her into a state of ritual impurity, not to mention the long-term physical discomfort, made her pretty desperate for healing? I think this woman had both great faith and was in great desperation, or one might say, chronic desperation.

Now, the temple leader. He felt he could confront Jesus directly, not in secret. In fact, in a great crowd of people he put Jesus on the spot, almost demanding that he come to see his daughter and heal her right away. So, while I think that because his daughter was on the verge of death (unlike the woman) this man was indeed desperate. His desperation was the overriding factor in seeking Jesus out. He believed his daughter was on death's doorstep, right? But, he must have had faith, too, right? If he was a skeptic, if he thought Jesus was just a crackpot and not a miracle healer he never would have sought Jesus out, especially in a crowd. He must have had some faith to think that Jesus could actually heal her. Or, I suppose the sceptic in us could say that even though he may not have had great faith, he thought it couldn't hurt to ask Jesus to help. There's an element of faith in that behavior.

So, what is the take-away from the story of these two people? One with great faith and one who was just desperate? I think it's fair to look at the juxtaposition of these stories in that way. But, I also think it's fair to think there is more complexity and nuance in discerning the motivations of these two people. They both had some level of faith and they both had some level of desperation, too. This is a really good example of a Bible story that often has been interpreted in two simple ways—faith and desperation. But, I think we can see that people are complex creatures and can be driven by mixed motivations. So, the next time you are arguing with someone, give them credit for the position they are taking as coming not from some simple place, but rather a more complex set of circumstances and motivations.

But, then there is the question of privilege. Here I think it is clear. The woman with the hemorrhage clearly didn't believe she had the cultural acceptance or power to ask Jesus openly to heal her. The temple leader was sure in his status—he had no compunction about openly and in a crowd almost demanding that Jesus answer his call. If he was truly desperate and without feelings of privilege he might have brought his daughter directly to Jesus to save time and get his daughter close enough to quietly touch Jesus.

Now, finally, here is another conclusion: Jesus loves everyone—the powerful and the privileged and the weak and desperate. Jesus healing love was shared

with both. Remember, my friends, God's reign falls on the wicked and the blessed.

Another conclusion: the Bible we read is not always so simple as we learned it to be. It is not so literal as we might think. While the type on the pages might be black and white (and sometime red, too) the stories are not always so black and white and faith communities who teach differently are doing a disservice to one of the most complex, powerful, works of faith and literature ever written. The Bible is about you and me and the complexity of life, and especially the complexity of living a life of faith.

There are some simple, yet most powerful messages, though, that are in the Bible. Love your neighbor. Love God. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Those are the major themes of faith that are threaded throughout the stories of the Bible. Desperation or faith? Privileged or the powerless? God loves them all. Amen.

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