

## Desperation

First UMC of Pocatello  
November 7, 2021

Mark 5:21-43

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Before there ever was a church; before there ever was a community with formal creeds containing vetted beliefs, or Conferences and committees, properties and budgeted line items, there was this: the desperation of a father whose daughter lay dying, the desperation of a woman who saw one last chance to alleviate her pain. From the beginning, desperation, more than most anything else, has driven people to Jesus. From one point of view, the church is a community of gamblers who have placed a reckless, final, all-in wager on Jesus' mercy.

Much of the world looks with judgment upon the Desperate, but desperation *is* warranted: the child hangs onto her life by a thread, and the woman “spent all that she had” and “only grew worse” (Mk. 5:26). In a time when the number twelve symbolizes completion and perfection – twelve tribes of Israel, twelve disciples, twelve-year-old Jesus astounding the Temple elders with his wisdom (Luke 2:42-51) – God's perfect desire for the wholeness of creation is confronted by a sick and shrunken form of completion: that small, closed circle of despair which says that there are no options left, there is no way out. Twelve years old and fading fast; twelve years of bleeding with no relief.

Desperation moves all creatures, including human beings, to rash behavior. Jairus, a powerful and influential man is a leader of the synagogue, a member of the class of people who, in Mark's Gospel, have begun rejecting Jesus. But when all other options fail him, he comes and falls to his knees at Jesus' feet. He will consult his enemy if it might mean healing for his little girl. He begs Jesus for help.

From the opposite side of the social spectrum, the unnamed woman, chronically unclean according to Mosaic law and plunged into poverty by her prolonged condition, pushes through the crowd to get to the Teacher. With every bump into another body, she transmits her impure status – but she is past the point of caring. For her, there is just the hem of his robe growing closer. She stretches out her hand.

Thanks be to God that Jesus is moved by desperate acts such as these. Jesus stops and turns to behold us. Jesus goes into the inner room of our wavering hopes.

Sometimes we fear that Jesus has limited time and attention to give. Occasionally, I will hear people say that they don't pray to God about their personal needs because they don't want to keep God from attending to someone else. *If we feel like we're not as bad off as others*, the reasoning goes, *why should we take up so much of God's time?* Can you imagine Jairus's panic when Jesus stopped the crowd to attend to the bleeding woman? Every moment mattered for his daughter, so there was no time to waste. Jesus needed to hurry up and get to the house! Yet Jesus took the time to stop, and not just to stop but to *stand there waiting around*, looking for the person that no one else was seeing.

Our time is not like God's time. In *our* time, God's delay means our perishing, our loss. But in God's time, there is room for everyone who suffers. There is no competition between different kinds of suffering. Jairus and the bleeding woman are not enemies vying for Jesus' attention. They are human creatures, held together in the loving gaze and concern of their Creator.

Sometimes we worry about being "too much" for God to handle. We are unworthy. God could never understand, and if God tried, God would only get worn out! *Lord, if I reach out to you, I will dirty you, too; you'll turn me away unhealed just like everybody else, and I'll be worse off than I was before.* Twelve years is a long time for anyone to suffer without reprieve. Twelve years is long enough to convince you that you don't merely have a burden, but you must *be* the burden itself. It becomes arduous to tell the whole story. You sound crazy, or dramatic, or pathetic. Touching Jesus risks drawing him into the mess.

Even so, the woman casts aside the stigma of her uncleanness. She seizes this moment with Jesus as the moment of her redemption, and she is repaid with healing, a blessing of peace, and the assurance of salvation. She is not "too much" for Jesus, because Jesus offers his power and his blessing without interrogation.

Friends, here in the church, when we ask the Holy Spirit to make us more like Jesus, one thing we are asking is that God will send the Desperate to us, that we will have opportunities to look with compassion into faces overwhelmed by desperation, that we will be willing to go where the Desperate ask us to go. We cannot offer this ministry through our own strength, but only in the name of the One who emptied himself and became one of the Desperate. *Jesus* shared our desperate condition to its mortal end. *Jesus* cried out from the cross a cry of desperation. *Jesus* suffered the closure of time and the hard hand of the world. He has been with us in our deepest despair, and only he has raised us to a living hope.

In his name, we bless the Desperate by offering prayers of intercession. When we allow the desperation of another to become our own desperation, that is intercession. When we stand in the gap for someone else, that is intercession. When we make another's plea for help, healing, shelter, food, stability, community, comfort, or equality our own, *that* is intercession. We intercede with words and with groanings deeper than words; we intercede with our bodies, marching in protest or standing in the way of intended harm; we intercede by making our time spacious and our love free.

In those moments, we are called to trust in Jesus' abundance of time and provide patient, focused attention to those who need it. We are called to see with the eyes of Christ, and look for the person beneath the suffering.

God can do much with a desperate prayer. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses," the scripture says (Heb. 4:15). In his name, by his Spirit, let us open our arms to the world.

Amen.