



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“A DEAD GIRL AND A SICK WOMAN”

Scripture Lessons: Mark 5:21-43

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Rev. James T. Rogers on Sunday, June 28, 2009.

This has been quite a week, hasn't it? If you were like me, you have been glued to the television, internet, and radio. We have witnessed the deaths of several generational icons and have said goodbye to Ed McMahon, Farrah Fawcett, and Michael Jackson. Television has documented to us the tattered marriage of Jon and Kate Gosselin, from the television show *Jon and Kate Plus 8*. We have witnessed the strange disappearance of our state's governor, and then his confession of infidelity. This week has been categorized by death and despair, pain and suffering.

But we don't have to look to national or local news for stories about death and struggle. Just this past Monday night, I was overcome by the number of prayer concerns relating to members of our congregation and our community which were raised at our session meeting: a story of a husband dealing with the death of his spouse; stories of congregation members battling cancer; a story of a local family in search of a missing daughter. We have our own stories of death and despair, and pain and suffering. In the midst of these struggles, who can we rely on and where can we go for help?

At this point in Mark's gospel, we have learned that Jesus can calm the storms that arise on the lake, and that Jesus can handle demons, but does he concern himself with our more common human struggles? One night at Kirk Club, our high school group discussed this question. One of our youth had lost her IPOD and had prayed that God would help her find it. Soon after she tossed a magazine on her bed, which ended up falling between the bed and the wall. When she reached down to get the magazine, she found her IPOD. When is it appropriate to seek God's help?

In Mark's gospel lesson, two very different people approach Jesus for help. One is a man; the other is a woman. Jairus is a leader in the synagogue and a person of status. The woman, a nobody in her society, isn't even given a name. Jairus pleads for help on behalf of his dying daughter, while the woman pleads on her own behalf for help with her continual bleeding. Jairus is probably wealthy, while the woman is most likely poor. Yet both Jairus and the woman go to Jesus for help.

I imagine that some of us can relate to the struggles of the people in this text. For those of you who have grown older, maybe you can relate to the woman. When you were younger doctors always seemed to be able to provide cures, but now as you have aged, trips to the doctor have become more frequent and the number of pills you take each day has increased. A man in his seventies said, "After a certain age, you are never really well. Just less sick."¹ Maybe some of you can relate to Jairus, as you have cared for children who have been seriously ill. While I am not a parent, I imagine that it is tougher for a father or mother to watch a child battle illness and disease, than for the parent to battle that sickness himself. Feelings of powerlessness and fear must overwhelm those parents who have a child fighting for his or her life.

¹ *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 8: Matthew and Mark, page 590.

Against all odds, both Jairus and this woman approach Jesus for help. Both were desperate for a miracle. There were barriers that could have prevented Jairus from approaching Jesus. Since Jairus was a ruler in the synagogue, he was quite an influential member of his community. It would have been customary for others to come and beg him for favors. If he somehow needed help, others would expect him to send a representative. Never in a million years would anyone in his community expect him to come to Jesus, fall at his feet, and beg repeatedly for his help. Defying his culture's understanding of honor and shame, Jairus humbles himself before our Lord.

There are barriers that could have prevented the woman from approaching Jesus. After suffering for twelve years and spending all that she had on medical care, she could have just given up and lost hope that she would ever be made well again. Because of her continual bleeding, she posed the danger of ritual impurity for anyone who came in contact with her; simply entering a crowd of people was something she was not allowed to do. And because she was a woman, approaching Jesus was a social taboo. Nevertheless, this woman entered the crowd, pressed herself towards Jesus, and touched his cloak.

Just like Jairus and the woman, there are barriers that keep us from seeking Jesus for our healing as well. Maybe we feel guilt for those things that we have done wrong in our lives; for the sin that is a reminder of our brokenness. Last week during the Time for Children, I gave each of the children a pencil with an eraser as a reminder to them that just as an eraser erases the mistakes we make when we write, Jesus erases our mistakes, our sin, when we say we are sorry and ask for God's forgiveness. One of the children asked a question that we adults ask as well: "What happens when the eraser runs out?" The Good News is that God's eraser never runs out. Don't let guilt keep you from seeking God's healing and comfort in situations of pain and struggle.

Maybe we are so busy seeking care from so many other sources, such as family members, friends, financial advisors, therapists, and doctors, that we forget to call on our Savior. When we are suffering, there are so many people that God puts in our lives to help us get through our struggles, and it is so important that we take advantage of these relationships. I was once told a fictional story about a man who died in a car accident. He went to Heaven and the first thing he asked God was, "Why didn't you save me from that car wreck?" and God's response was, "Why didn't you wear the seatbelt that I gave you?" I truly believe that God places people in our lives who can help us get through tough times, but we should never forget that we have direct access to God through Jesus Christ, and that we can seek healing and peace in his name.

Maybe the secular world's labeling of our faith as foolishness, causes us to be embarrassed about seeking God's healing and comfort. Christians sometimes are mocked or ridiculed for their beliefs and practices. So often when someone is facing a tough time in his or her life, we tell him that we are praying for him, and prayer is certainly a way that we are called to support one another during difficult times. One thing that God has really challenged me with lately is changing my "I am praying for you" language to "Can I pray for you right now?" Even as a pastor, sometimes I feel a little uncomfortable about praying out loud with someone out in public. I have come to realize that I am worried about what others are thinking, and God has really convicted me of this. We should feel comfortable praying for healing and wholeness both in our homes and churches, and also out in the public square. We should not and cannot let the secular world's commentary on our faith, impact how we seek God's healing and peace.

However, the reality is that for every woman who seeks Jesus' healing presence and is freed from her suffering, another who pleads with Jesus in faith will battle her illness for the rest of her life. For every father who cries out to Jesus to save his daughter and is able to rejoice, another faith-filled father watches his precious child pass away. For many, healing comes after the fact, as people

remember with gratitude the loved one that they have lost. Healing comes from confidence that the loved one is now at peace and is freed from his fragile earthly existence.

For others who have personally faced many struggles and hardships, healing comes as that person remembers the life that he was able to live.

While I was at seminary, I attended a Benny Hinn Miracle Crusade at the Phillips Arena in Atlanta. I was interested in learning more about his Pentecostal theology and wanted to witness the healings that happen at his crusades. After a time of singing the old hymns of the church, Benny presented his understanding of the gospel that those who are truly saved experience not only forgiveness of sins, but also physical healing. This is a theology that causes me great concern. As scores of people lined up to share their healing, just as many people were wheeling themselves out of the arena, having not received their miracle and unsure of their salvation. My heart broke for these people, knowing that it wasn't a lack of faith that kept these people from being healed, and knowing that for some, their healing will be a more gradual process, day by day, and that others will experience their healing in heaven.

As I was reading our gospel lesson this past week and preparing for the sermon, the title of the lesson in my Bible, kept grabbing my attention: "A Dead Girl and a Sick Woman." The original Greek New Testament does not have Scripture lesson titles. The translators and editors have added these titles to aid in the reading of the Bible. This title leads us to believe that this Scripture passage is full of death and despair, while it is instead all about healing and new life. The title is all about where these people have been, but the passage is all about where they are now. The title describes hopelessness, while the lesson is one that is filled with hope.

In fact we have been given a picture of Jesus and a picture of our God. And for us, this story is less about a woman seeking healing and a father trying to save his daughter, and more about a God who can heal; a God who healed through the person of Jesus Christ during his early existence and a God who continues to heal and bring wholeness to his creation; a God who can raise Jairus's daughter from the dead, and a God who can raise his son Jesus Christ from the dead as well; a God who can bring life out of death and who can also give life to those who are only partially alive.

If God can heal a woman who has been suffering from bleeding for twelve years, who has spent all of her money on doctors, and who is unclean...if God can raise Jairus' daughter from the dead, even after people have gathered to mourn her death...and if God can raise his own Son Jesus Christ from the dead after being crucified on a cross and sealed away in the tomb, then what can he do in your life? What pain and suffering, sickness and disease, hurt and loss, can he heal?

If a woman who is ritually unclean from her bleeding and who is a social outcast can enter the crowd and touch the cloak of Jesus...and if a religious and social leader can humble himself at the feet of Jesus, what can keep us from seeking our wholeness and healing in Jesus Christ through prayer, worship, Bible study, and service?

On the 2009 middle school mission trip to Charlotte, our team was able to serve at eight different ministry sites during the week. One of our stops was at a place called The Haven, which is a home for people suffering from Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. The residents were so gracious and welcoming to our group as we talked and sang songs with them. As we began to sing the song, "Trading My Sorrows" by Darrell Evans, a song that I have sung many times, the words began to take on a completely new meaning for me. While I have a very limited personal understanding of suffering, sickness, and pain, I was surrounded by a group of people who were living it, day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, and second by second. We were singing the

words: “I’m trading my sorrow, I’m trading my shame, I trading my sickness, I’m trading my pain, I’m laying it down for the joy of the Lord.”

A few months ago I received an email from Nancy and Mike Haninger, two of our Presbyterian Mission Co-workers who serve at the Good Shepherd Hospital in the Congo. That month Mike had operated on twelve ladies with obstetric fistula, a condition where there is an abnormal passageway between the urinary and reproductive tract. These women are social outcasts in their society, which leads to both hardship and psychological trauma, and these women are modern day examples of the woman who approached Jesus for healing from her bleeding. At the hospital, after each woman is healed of her condition all of the women sing together in joy and celebration for her healing. Mike even included with the email a short video of the women singing together in joy, writing, “This is the spontaneous thank you from these ladies to you for making it possible for them to return to a life without shame and to be reunited with their friends and families as a whole person.”

I am confident that God desires that same feeling of healing and wholeness for all of his creation. God wants us to experience physical healing from our sickness and pain, emotional healing in our relationships with one another, spiritual healing in our lives of faith, and healing from whatever struggles come our way. May we through prayer, worship, Bible study, and service, reach up and touch the cloak of Jesus in faith, and hear his words, “Your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

Let us pray: O Savior in this quiet place, where anyone may kneel, we also come to ask for grace, believing you can heal. If pain of body, stress of mind, destroys our inward peace, in prayer for others may we find the secret of release.² Amen.

² “O Savior, in This Quiet Place,” Fred Pratt Green, Hymn #390, *PCUSA Hymnal* 1990.