

An Encouraging Word

Mark 5: 21 – 43

Makemie Presbyterian Church

June 28, 2009

²¹When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. ²²Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came & when Jarius saw Jesus he fell at his feet ²³& begged Jesus, again & then again, saying, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come & lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well & live.”

²⁴So Jesus went with Jarius. And a large crowd followed Jesus & pressed in on him.

²⁵Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. ²⁶She had endured much under many physicians & had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. ²⁷She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.”

²⁹Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. ³⁰Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?”

³¹And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’”

³²Jesus looked all around to see who had done it. ³³But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear & trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.

³⁴He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

³⁵While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the leader’s Jarius’ house to say, “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?”

³⁶But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe.”

³⁷Jesus allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. ³⁸When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly.

³⁹When Jesus had entered, he said to them, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.”

⁴⁰And they laughed at him.

Then Jesus put them all outside, and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was.

⁴¹Jesus took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!”

⁴²And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. ⁴³Jesus strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

This ends the reading of the word.

Sometimes, my husband & I get into arguments. Here is one. It goes like this:

“Why do you find fault with everything I do?” John, asks me. He goes on.

“I know about other husbands out there. How many of them would do what I do for this marriage? Why can’t you praise me once in awhile?”

“But that’s where you have it all wrong,” I say. “Justifying your actions with comparisons like (that are) not helpful. We are each responsible for our own actions.”

So, you can see I can be hard to deal with. And as I often do after John & I argue, I go over & over the exchange in my mind. I was struggling with this incident as I worked with our story this morning about Jesus healing the woman with the issue of blood & the young daughter of the synagogue leader. And in ah “ah ha” moment, I thought, that instead of offering an encouraging word to John, I had concentrated on a perceived weakness. Like the people in this story, the synagogue leader, the towns folk, and especially the disciples, I too, went straight for the weakness. As in the women would never be healed, I mean, come on, after 12 years, and the daughter was already dead, for goodness sakes. But Jesus, doesn’t focus on our point of weakness, instead he meets us there. He strengthens the

woman & the young daughter with an encouraging word. Jesus heals the two of them, saying, “Daughter your faith has made you well” to the woman. And then raises the child, saying first to her father, “Do not fear, only believe.”

It made me think. Do my words offer judgment or encouragement? Do yours? I don't know. Sometimes I think the miracle stories in the Bible do more harm than good. But they're spectacular stories & there is a lot of comfort in watching Jesus still the storm, heal the sick, raise the dead. Jesus' miracles remind us that the way things are isn't the way they will always be & there is great power available to us through our kinship with him. He's living proof that God's will for us isn't chaos but wholeness & every miracle proclaims that truth. Every healing, every revival, every banishment of evil, every word spoken of encouragement is like a hole poked through the fabric of time & space. The kingdom breaks through & for a moment or two we see how things will be – or how they really are right now in the mind of God – and then it's over. The disciples go back to their rowing, the once-blind beggar walks off to look for work, the little girl stretches her arms above her head & reaches out for the bread her amazed mother offers her.

Every one of us knows someone who is suffering. Every one of us knows someone who could use a miracle, but miracles are hard to come by. Not everyone who prays for one gets one, not by a long shot, and meanwhile there are people who get them without even asking, remember two Sundays ago, the reading from Mark about Jesus walking on the water, that ends with “and everyone who touched his cloak was healed.” What if they didn’t have faith? What if they didn’t believe Jesus is the Messiah? What if they were idol worshippers, pagans? Mark says, “All, all who touched Jesus cloak.” It’s hard; this randomness. There needs to be a formula, doesn’t there? You know two parts prayer, three parts faith, one part good works, a sprinkle of encouraging words. We comb through the miracle stories to find out who did what right & who did what wrong, so we can learn from their experience. Then we imitate their virtues & avoid their faults in hope that we will become irresistible to God.

If only God would do the same thing twice. It’s hard to follow a unique example. For instance, in our text this morning from the fifth chapter of Mark’s gospel, we get two miracle stories layered together. First the story of Jairus & his daughter – one of the three resurrection stories in the gospels, not counting Christ’s own. It’s the bread of a larger sandwich Mark has prepared for us. The middle part of the sandwich is the story of the

woman who has bled for twelve years before she touches the hem of Jesus' garment & is healed.

Mark inserts the second story inside the first one for a reason, because bleeding women & dead little girls were both taboo in Judaism.

By having anything to do with either one of them, Jesus renders himself unclean. And Jesus was a holy man; he was expected to steer clear of defilement. If, if it happened to him by mistake, as it did the moment the bleeding woman touched him, then according to the law he should have gone off to purify himself. Until he did, he was contagious and unfit for holy duty. But Jesus didn't go off to purify himself. He sends the healed woman on her way & turns around to follow Jairus again – causing quite a scandal, I imagine when he steps inside the man's house. Jairus was elder of the synagogue, you see, a respected elder in the community whose obedience to the law was a matter of record. For someone like him to seek help from someone like Jesus must have caused a whole lot of talk. It would be like a neurosurgeon using the children's game "Operation" to make a diagnosis; "Ah, it's the light bulb."

This is not just a story about Jesus or even about a little girl raised from the dead. It's also about a father who broke every rule he knew in

order to save his daughter's life. Can you imagine what it must have been like for Jairus to fall at Jesus' feet in front of a big crowd? And then Jairus who is leading Jesus through the crowd, is stopped short by the woman with the hemorrhage – whose condition had gone on as long as his daughter has been alive, it wasn't as if her condition was life threatening. But his own child's life was slipping away – and then he is told that it is too late, that his daughter was dead & there is no reason to trouble Jesus any more.

Okay. This is as bad as it gets. We beg on our knees for help & it comes too late. We give up all our cherished beliefs to grab at one last wild straw & it comes off in our hand. The ground rushes up to meet us & just before the sun goes out for good, we hear a voice:

“Do not fear, only believe.”

Sounds like a formula, doesn't it? If we will just believe hard enough, our prayers will be answered. If we just have enough faith, things will turn out right. Well it worked for Jairus, but it doesn't happen that way, every time. Most of us don't get a miracle like that & one of the meanest things religious people do is blame it on a lack of faith.

I remember when my Aunt Annie was in the cancer ward at Druid City Hospital in Tuscaloosa Alabama complaining about a “perfect strangers” coming into her room, holding hands around her bed & praying for an increase in her clearly inadequate faith. When I went to discuss this with the hospital chaplain, it turned out that a local church was doing this to the patients in the cancer ward – uninvited—as a part of their healing ministry, only it didn’t have a healing effect. It had a bludgeoning effect, as people who were already sick got a strong dose of guilt & shame to go along with their chemotherapy.

I believe that the church people were well intentioned. I also believe they had gotten mixed up about what causes miracles. They thought faith made miracles happen. They thought miracles worked along the same lines as those strength tests you used to see at county fairs, the ones that looked like big thermometers with red ringers at the top. It was all a matter of how hard you could hit the thing with a sledgehammer. If you’re really strong you could ring the bell & win the prize. And if you were not, well try, try again & better luck next time.

In other words, they thought miracles were something we could control. If we’re sick & getting sicker, it must be our own fault. We must try harder. Pump up your faith & ring the bell. Step right up. Impress God with

the power of your belief and get your miracle; like a big stuffed animal as your reward. Only this is idolatry. Do you see? This is one more of our pitiful efforts to work things around so that we seem to be in charge of our lives; instead of owning up to the truth that every single breath we take is a free surprise from God. Faith does not work miracles. God does. To concentrate on the strength of our own belief is to practice magic. To concentrate on the strength of God is to practice faith. This isn't just semantics. This is the difference between believing our lives are in our own hands & believing they are in God's. God, not faith, works miracles.

Did Jairus' daughter have faith? I don't think so. She was on her way out of the world. Did Jairus have faith? Mark never says so. Jairus just follows Jesus home & watches as that unclean holy man did his work. Either way, the high point wasn't then but earlier, when Jesus told him, "Do not fear, only believe."

If Jairus was able to do that, then he would have survived whatever happened next, even if Jesus had walked into his daughter's room, closed her eyes with his fingertips & pulled the sheet over her head. Her father's belief would have become the miracle at this point, his willingness to believe that she was still in God's good hands even though she had slipped out of his.

It helps me to remember that Jesus prayed for a miracle on the night before he died. "For you all things are possible," he prayed to his abba. "Remove this cup from me."

Only when Jesus opened his eyes the cup was still there. Did he lack faith? I don't think so. The miracle was that he drank the cup, believing in the power of God more than he believed in his own. It's always a miracle, isn't it, when we understand that God is God & we are not?

But, I don't expect any of us to stop praying for miracles. I hope not because the world needs all the miracles it can get. Every time we get one remember, we're getting a preview of the kingdom. Be encouraged. And say encouraging words; especially about your church. In fact, whatever you would like to hear about Makemie, you be the first to say it. "It's a wonderful place to worship; full of warm people & amazing music." Or, "I feel close to God in the sanctuary of Makemie." Or, "Even though I expect the rafters to come loose because I'm sitting there, it never happens."

Remember, there's no formula for success. And isn't that a real relief? Especially for those of us who can't seem to ring the bell. Maybe we can't do it, because it's not our job. "Do not fear, only believe."

The rest is up to God. Amen.