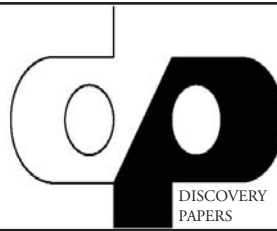


DESPERATION AND FAITH

SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK



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Mark 5:21-43
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Writer Ivan Gold, who died earlier this year, told of his experience with Alcoholics Anonymous:

The change comes when you're willing to do what AA tells you. They said to get down on your knees and pray. I said, "I can't do that, I'm a Jew. We don't do that." About a week later I was down on my hands and knees in my living room, trying to pray. You're willing to try anything to manufacture a life without alcohol.¹

The scriptures depict all of us as needy for something that we can't manufacture. Whether we realize it or not, we hunger and thirst desperately for spiritual food and drink: the body and blood of Christ. It helps to be desperate, or at least to realize that you're desperate. Mark 5:21-43 features two desperate individuals: an unclean woman and a distraught father. Both of them, like Gold, fall helplessly to the ground. Their stories tell us what to do when we're desperate.

The three passages in Mark 4:35-5:43 each feature the specter of death. In Mark 4:35-41, Jesus calmed the raging sea and rescued his followers. In Mark 5:1-20, Jesus liberated a man who lived among the dead. In Mark 5:21-43, he looks fully into the face of death.

Mark 5:21-43:

When Jesus had crossed over again in the boat to the other side, a large crowd gathered around Him; and so He stayed by the seashore. One of the synagogue officials named Jairus came up, and on seeing Him, fell at His feet and implored Him earnestly, saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death; please come and lay Your hands on her, so that she will get well and live." And He went off with him; and a large crowd was following Him and pressing in on Him.

A woman who had had a hemorrhage for twelve years, and had endured much at the hands of many physicians, and had spent all that she had and was not helped at all, but rather had grown worse—after hearing about Jesus, she came up in the crowd behind Him and touched His cloak. For she thought, "If I just touch His garments, I will get well." Immediately the flow of her blood was dried up; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction. Immediately Jesus, perceiving in Himself that the power proceeding from Him had gone forth, turned around in the crowd and said, "Who touched My garments?" And His disciples said to Him, "You see the crowd pressing in on You, and You say, 'Who touched Me?'" And He looked around to see the woman who had done this. But the woman fearing and trembling, aware of what had happened to her,

came and fell down before Him and told Him the whole truth. And He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your affliction."

While He was still speaking, they came from the house of the synagogue official, saying, "Your daughter has died; why trouble the Teacher anymore?" But Jesus, overhearing what was being spoken, said to the synagogue official, "Do not be afraid any longer, only believe." And He allowed no one to accompany Him, except Peter and James and John the brother of James. They came to the house of the synagogue official; and He saw a commotion, and people loudly weeping and wailing. And entering in, He said to them, "Why make a commotion and weep? The child has not died, but is asleep." They began laughing at Him. But putting them all out, He took along the child's father and mother and His own companions, and entered the room where the child was. Taking the child by the hand, He said to her, "Talitha kum!" (which translated means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"). Immediately the girl got up and began to walk, for she was twelve years old. And immediately they were completely astounded. And He gave them strict orders that no one should know about this, and He said that something should be given her to eat.²

The unclean woman

After his brief foray into Gentile country on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus, along with his disciples, returns to the more familiar Jewish turf on the western shore. Whereas the Gentiles in the east asked him to leave, the Jews in the west once again swarm him. Despite his popularity, Jesus has made no friends among Jewish leaders because of his unorthodox vision of the kingdom of God. A synagogue official would therefore be risking his position by associating with Jesus. Jairus, however, is desperate. His daughter is near death, and he has heard of Jesus' healing powers, which were occasionally employed by means of touch (Mark 1:31, 41). By bowing down before Jesus, Jairus, literally described as a "ruler," recognizes a greater ruler.³ Jesus goes with Jairus, evidently intending to lay hands on the girl and heal her.

Mark breaks off the story of Jairus to give a lengthy description of a woman who has suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years. Her condition has rendered her perpetually unclean, unfit for worship in the synagogue over which Jairus presided. Furthermore, everyone she touches becomes unclean (Leviticus 15:25-30). Unlike

Jairus, who occupied a prominent place in his world, this woman lives on the margins of society.

Mark's description serves to depict the woman as desperate: she's spent her life's savings on physicians and still her condition has worsened. Mark also depicts her in a way that evokes Israel as a whole. Her twelve-year affliction corresponds to the twelve tribes of Israel. Israel "spent all that she had" on other gods, "endured much" at their hands, and hasn't been "helped at all" but in fact has "grown worse." Mark's description of the woman echoes the prophet Isaiah's description of Israel:

For all of us have become like one who is unclean,
And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment;
And all of us wither like a leaf,
And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
There is no one who calls on Your name,
Who arouses himself to take hold of You
For You have hidden Your face from us
And have delivered us into the power of our iniquities
(Isaiah 64:6-7).

Mark's depiction of the woman parts company with Isaiah's depiction of Israel in this respect: she arouses herself to take hold of one who, at the very least, acts in the name of the Lord. This is what a desperate Israel should do: take hold of her Messiah that she might be healed.

Despite their differences, Jairus and the woman are depicted in similar ways. Both "came up" to Jesus. Both are depicted as perceiving him: Jairus sees Jesus; the woman has heard about him. Both speak of the potential saving touch of Jesus: Jairus wants Jesus to touch his daughter so that she might literally be "saved"; the woman wants to touch Jesus so that she might literally be "saved." Just as Jairus risked his position by associating with Jesus, the woman risks being exposed by touching him, which, according to the law, makes him unclean. Both are desperate. Mark wants us to see that Jairus and the woman have much in common.

After touching the cloak of Jesus, the woman knows that she has been healed. God, acting independently of the intent of Jesus, has healed the woman. The stoppage of the woman's "flow of blood" foreshadows the upper room, where Jesus will tell his disciples that the wine of the Passover represents his blood, which will be "poured out for many" (Mark 14:24). The Son of God, whose blood will flow so that many may be saved, stops the flow of blood coming from a woman who wanted to literally be "saved."⁴ Power to heal goes out of Jesus. His power to heal surpasses the woman's power to corrupt, in contrast to the Mosaic Law, which understood uncleanness to have the greater power (Haggai 2:11-13). The new age, which intensifies holiness, has burst upon the old age.

Jesus knows that the power to heal has proceeded from him, and he stops in an effort to identify the person who touched him—no doubt to the chagrin of Jairus, the desperate father for whom every second feels like a lifetime. It's as if the ambulance driver, on the way to save a life, stops to give attention to sprained ankle. Many people in the crowd were pressing against Jesus. His disciples, unaware that anyone has been healed, deem Jesus' desire to identify someone who touched him as both pointless and hopeless.

Jesus looks around to see this woman. The only reason anyone looked for her was to make sure she wasn't around so that they could avoid her. The woman, fearing the potential recriminations for touching someone in her unclean condition, nevertheless identifies herself. Like Jairus, she falls before Jesus. She also literally tells Jesus "all" the truth. Earlier, Mark noted that she had spent "all" she had on physicians who could not help her. She unburdens herself in the presence of the one who finally helped her. Jesus addresses this woman, who had been excluded by her world, in an inclusive and intimate way, calling her "daughter." His address unites her in yet another way with Jairus, whose "daughter" was sick. Jesus commends her "faith," correcting any notion she may have about the involvement of magic. God healed the woman, but her faith acted as the channel through which he healed her. "Faith" in the gospels, in its broadest sense, connotes the belief that God is working in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, invoking a blessing from the Hebrew Scriptures in order to complete her restoration, bids her to "go in peace" (Judges 18:6, 1 Samuel 1:17, 2 Samuel 15:9). He reassures her that her healing is not temporary but permanent: "be healed of your affliction." In healing her and assuring her, Jesus restores her to the community from which she had been excluded.

When Jesus sees the woman, who was afraid of being seen, what does he see? He sees not an outcast but a daughter. He sees not her filth but her faith.

Identifying with the unclean woman

Perhaps all of us can identify at least in part with the unclean woman. Those who suffer silently in isolation, however, may identify with her in a special way.

To some degree, perhaps because of what you've done, perhaps because of what's been done to you, perhaps because of relational challenges, you feel a little dirty—unfit for worship. You feel that you cause people trouble more often than you bring them a blessing. It feels as if some people keep their distance from you. Your condition seems to place you outside the party. You've spent your resources, both time and money, trying to make yourself presentable or to dull the pain, and you haven't been helped at all but have grown worse.

Something about Jesus, though, makes you think he's different. Yes, some back away when they see you. No, no one has helped you. Maybe Jesus is worth a try—worth the risk of exposing yourself, worth the risk of being disap-

pointed again. So you arouse yourself and reach out your hand. Immediately, even though you could gather enough courage to touch him only for a moment, you feel that something has changed.

Jesus stops. He looks for you in the crowd. You feel exposed. Many people in your world don't have the time for you, but Jesus—amazingly—breaks off an urgent mission to look for you. He even puts off an important person. What does he want? You want to believe that his power to heal is greater than your power to alienate. Somehow, you arouse yourself again and identify yourself. This time, instead of brushing by him and running for cover, you fall before him. You feel—you hope—that you can trust him with everything. You tell him all the truth—everything that's in your heart. The sorrow of the years erupts from a deep place inside you.

What will he do now? You've felt excluded, but he addresses you inclusively. You have not known intimacy, though you have ached for it, and he addresses you intimately. He calls you daughter. He calls you son. What does he see in you? Some others have seen something that caused them to back away. He sees what others don't. He sees in you the quality he values most. He sees faith. He tells you what you have ached to hear: he tells you that you belong. You belong to him, and you belong to his community. Go in peace.

Meanwhile, a desperate father waits interminably. If the woman waited twelve years, Jairus waits for a few minutes that feel like a lifetime.

The distraught father

While Jesus is still speaking to this “daughter,” news reaches the synagogue official concerning his daughter: the girl has died. Those delivering the news advise Jairus not to trouble Jesus anymore. Jesus, however, overhears their remarks and recommends a different course of action. The woman was fearful but nevertheless acted in faith. Jesus acknowledges Jairus' ongoing fear concerning the possible—and now apparently final—loss of his daughter but nevertheless urges him to “believe.”⁵ Jairus just witnessed Jesus heal a woman, call her “daughter,” and commend her faith. Now Jesus urges faith upon Jairus, even though his daughter is now dead. If the delay pushed Jairus' faith to the edge, the death of his daughter pushes it over the cliff. If physicians did not help the woman and she in actuality grew worse, then it appears that Jesus has not helped the man and that he also has grown worse, inasmuch as Jesus raised his hopes only to crush them.

Jesus takes with him his three closest associates, Peter, James, and John, as he enters Jairus' house.⁶ Jesus then encounters mourners, who visited bereaved families so that survivors could freely express their sorrow. He suggests that their mourning is inappropriate because they have an inaccurate understanding of the girl's condition: she's not dead; she's just asleep. Attentive readers will remember that

Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a farmer who “goes to bed at night and gets up by day” to see that the seed he cast on the soil has sprouted and grown (Mark 4:26-29). Jesus schooled Peter, James, and John in his parables, so he may have spoken to the mourners in part to awaken his disciples to amazing possibilities. The mourners are only awakened to the possibility that Jesus is a nut case. They respond not with faith but with ridicule. Ridicule and faith are incompatible, so Jesus literally “casts them all out” as if he were casting out demons. The disciples, who reacted with incredulity when Jesus stopped to look for someone who touched him, and the mourners both remain oblivious to the deep workings of the kingdom of God.

He proceeds with the girl's parents and his three disciples, and he takes the child by the hand. A corpse, like the bleeding woman, was considered unclean (Numbers 19:11-19). Whereas uncleanness was earlier thrust upon him, Jesus now thrusts himself upon uncleanness. He enters the house of death and touches its very soul. He speaks to the girl, commanding her to rise.⁷ Just as he told the unclean woman to “go in peace,” he tells the girl to “get up.” He restores both the woman and the girl to community. The woman fell before Jesus. The synagogue official fell before Jesus. Now a little girl rises before him. Jesus' touch, rather than defiling him, raises the girl to life. Once again, contrary to the Mosaic Law, holiness overcomes unholiness. Earlier, the woman touched Jesus, and she was healed. This girl has no ability to touch Jesus. So he touches her.

The unclean woman suffered for twelve years, and the girl is twelve years old. The girl, so different from the woman, also represents Israel, which is dead in its sins—in a state of living death, exiled from its God. Based on Ezekiel 37:1-14 and other texts, Israel anticipated being resurrected as God's people. It also looked forward to the resurrection of the righteous at the end of the age. The resurrection of one Israelite, who symbolically represents all Israel, is a harbinger of things to come: the resurrection of the Son of God, which means the renewal of God's people in the present and guarantees the resurrection of God's people in the future.

Based on Mark's narrative, we can use our imaginations and picture the Father taking the Son by the hand on the third day and saying to him, “My Son, I say to you, get up!” The resurrection of the girl signals that God's new creation is bursting forth in the middle of the old creation. In the presence of Jesus Christ, even death flees. The reaction of the witnesses—one of amazement—echoes the earlier reactions and foreshadows the reaction of the women at the tomb (Mark 16:8).

Jesus, once again, commands secrecy, which allows him to leave without being crushed by the crowd. Also, if word got out concerning his authority over death, those with authority in this world would be alerted to the presence of a potential rival. He also tells those nearby to give the girl something to eat before she's inundated.⁸

Identifying with the distraught father.

All of us can probably identify with Jairus, at least in part. However, just those who suffer silently in isolation may relate to the woman in a special way, those who enjoy some measure of authority in our world may identify with Jairus in a special way.

You're a "ruler," so to speak. What you say carries weight. You call at least some of the shots—in the workplace, in your family, in the community, or in the church. You value being appreciated for what you have achieved, for being self-sufficient, for being reliable. The authority you value most is the authority you have over your own life, and woe betide anyone who interferes with your right to choose. You despise weakness and vulnerability. You're in control—or at least you think you are.

Then, it appears as if you might lose someone—or something—that you cherish: a loved one, a relationship, a job, your health, your magic touch. Your well-ordered world crumbles. You become that which you previously despised: weak and vulnerable. You recognize, maybe for the first time, that you're not in control. You become desperate. You care not so much anymore about how you're perceived or what it might cost you to deal with this new reality. You need help.

But you know that not just anyone can help you. You hear that Jesus of Nazareth has helped others. You come up to him and fall—yes, fall—at his feet. You open up your heart to him, even in the presence of others whose respect you previously coveted. You beg—yes, beg—him to help you. He raises your hopes. Nevertheless, he does nothing about your plight. You wanted desperately for him to save something—or someone—you cherish, but he lets that thing or that person die.

You hear voices, or maybe simply voices in inside your head. They say, "Don't bother with Jesus anymore." Then you hear another voice. His voice. "Do not be afraid any longer, only believe" Believe? Believe in what? Believe in who? He still wants faith? You've lost everything, and he wants faith? You had faith—at least some faith—but he dawdled and let you down. Who does he think he is?

What you've lost, he says—"it's not dead; it's just asleep." What could he possibly mean? To believe, to continue believing in his power and goodness in the face of the world's agony and your loss invites ridicule. The voices return, this time with laughter—sarcastic, scoffing, biting laughter. This time, Jesus himself silences the voices. He enters your house. He goes into that room. Yes, that room—the place of loss, the place of betrayal, the place of death. No one else has ever been to that room. You wanted no one there, nor did anyone want to go there. But he comes, and you let him in. Now he speaks, not to a place, not to a room, but to a person who lives there—a person who died there. He speaks to a little girl, to a little boy. He speaks to you, to the hopes of that little girl or little boy inside you that flickered and died. He reaches out and touches you, taking you by the hand, and speaks to you in a strange but tender tongue, one that you somehow understand: "Talitha kum." He says to you, "Arise." The little girl, the little boy, inside you stirs. You haven't

felt anything there in years. You feel yourself getting up. You begin to walk—in newness of life. You walk to the door and take one last look around. You crack the door. It's bright out there—much brighter than you imagined. You leave the room, close the door behind you, and walk into a new day. You wonder about the days ahead.

A new family

In so many ways, not least by wrapping the story of the distraught father around the story of the unclean woman and by uniting the crucifixion and the resurrection, Mark is telling us that the two people in the narrative belong together, even though Jairus would otherwise have nothing to do with a woman whose condition excluded her from the synagogue. They are brought together in this story first by suffering, second by desperation, and finally by faith. Their stories, taken together, have all the earmarks of a new family defined by faith in Christ.

If you identify with the desperate woman, throw yourself at the feet of Jesus. If you identify with the desperate father, throw yourself at the feet of Jesus. Before you get up, look next to you. See the man, or see the woman. You thought the two of you had nothing in common. You thought your story had nothing to do with him or her, but now you see: your stories are entwined. You have trod different paths, but desperation and faith have brought you to the same place: the ground before the feet of Jesus. You not only believe in the same Lord, you also belong to the same family. You belong to each other. Greet your brother. Greet your sister.

NOTES

¹ Quoted by Dan Wakefield, "A Great Circle Coming Fully Around," *Mars Hill Review* (Littleton, Col.: Winter/Spring 1996), 108.

² Literary structure:

A Official came up to Jesus (5:21-22)

B Official asked Jesus to lay hands on his daughter that she might be (literally) "saved" (5:23-24)

A' Woman came up to Jesus (5:25-27)

B' Woman wanted to touch Jesus' garment that she be (literally) "saved" (5:28)

C Jesus healed woman: "go in peace" (5:29-31)

D Jesus validated the woman's faith (*pistis*) (5:32-34)

D' Jesus encouraged the synagogue official to believe (*pisteuō*) (5:35-40)

C' Jesus raised the synagogue official's daughter: "get up!" (5:41-43)

³ Like Jairus, the demoniac who went by the name of Legion saw Jesus, bowed down before him, and implored him (Mark 5:6-12.) Jesus' authority is recognized by demons and humans alike. He is Lord of heaven and earth.

⁴ The verb translated "get well" in verse 23 and 28—literally, "be

saved”—alerts readers that these stories of healings point to a more comprehensive healing from all that is opposed to humanity: Satan, sin, and death.

⁵The noun translated “faith” (pistis) is related to the verb that is translated “believe” (pisteuō).

⁶Jesus, like Moses and David, the two most prominent leaders of Israel, has three close associates (Exodus 24:9, 2 Samuel 23:8-23, 1 Chronicles 11:10-25). He would also take Peter, James, and John with him to a mountain, where he was transfigured, and to Gethsemane, where he sought the will of the Father (Mark 9:2, 14:32-33).

⁷Jesus spoke in Aramaic. Mark wrote in Greek and therefore translated Jesus’ words into Greek. On three occasions, however, he records Jesus’ Aramaic words. The two other occasions each concerned the experience of crucifixion (Mark 14:36, 15:34). In Mark 5:41, however, Jesus’ words (“Talitha kum”) command a resurrection. Mark, though the use of Aramaic words, vividly draws attention to the crucifixion of Jesus and to the resurrection of the daughter of a ruler that foreshadows the resurrection of the Son of God.

⁸Jesus and his disciples would later be inundated so that they were unable to eat (Mark 6:31).