



## **July 1, 2018 -Whatever My Lot The Opposing Stories of Jairus and Jason**

**St. Mark 5:21-43**

**Given by Rev. Phil Schroeder**

Miracle stories like these we have just heard are interesting, intriguing, curious. They seem to be good news, a piece of what the church likes to call “the good news.” But it turns out that they may not be such good news, it turns out they may present more problems than answers. They are spectacular stories, and we rightly take comfort from them, watching Jesus still a storm (last Sunday’s gospel story) or heal the sick or even, as here, raise the dead. One thing they tell us for sure is that there is a greater power available to us through our attachment to Jesus. Or as Shakespeare says in one place, there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. Jesus is the living proof that what God wants for us is wholeness and abundant life, not chaos, not sickness, not even death. God’s dream for the world is in many respects quite different from what is going on much of the time. But, you see, none of these miracles radically changes the way the world works: the disciples go back to their boats, the once-blind beggar goes off to look for work, and the little girl reaches out to take the bread her stunned mother hands her.

The problem with miracles stories like this, says Barbara Brown Taylor, is that it’s hard to hear about them without wanting one for yourself. We all know people who need a miracle, who are praying for a miracle, for themselves or for a loved one. But miracles are hard to come by. Not everyone who prays for one gets one, not by a long shot. And some people get them without even praying for them. It seems to be a terribly random affair, and it’s fine if you’re on the winning side of random but not so fine if you’re not. We wish we could figure out the formula, but no one has.

Here in Mark’s gospel, chapter 5, are two miracle stories, a second one inserted into the middle of the first. The first is the story of Jairus and his daughter, one of four back-to- life stories in the gospels (Jesus, Lazarus, Jairus’ daughter, a young boy - really resuscitations except for Jesus). And inside that story is the one of the woman who bled for twelve years and stopped bleeding when she touched the hem of Jesus’s garment. One thing these two stories have in common

is that they both involved Jesus in ritual uncleanness. You were supposed to steer clear of bleeding women and dead persons, especially if you weren’t a midwife or nurse or coroner. And if you didn’t, for whatever reason, you were supposed to ritually purify yourself before you did anything else. (Leviticus 15:25-31) Here’s another instance of Jesus sorting of breaking the law, but just like the time we saw four weeks ago (Mark 2:23-3:6), he does it in order to do good, to bring help to someone in dire need. That’s when Jesus taught us that love trumps the law, love is the fulfilling of the law. And how we wish our Attorney General would read that chapter of the Bible (Mark 2 & 3) alongside his reading of Romans 13 and not try to justify his tearing children away from their families at immigration centers on the basis of the Bible. Jesus did not put himself through the process of ritual purification. He just sent the healed woman on her way and then

went back to helping Jairus with his daughter.

Jairus was a leader in the synagogue, president of the congregation perhaps (I think his first name was Al Jairus), a respected leader in the community who had to be careful to stay out of trouble with the law. But he was likely desperate enough that he didn't care where his help came from. There was a crowd there, but he threw himself at Jesus' feet like the beggar he was. In doing so, he came close to that bleeding woman himself. And then word came that it was too late, his child had died, there was nothing Jesus could do, it was time to go home and take care of things. This is about as bad as it gets for a distinguished man like Jairus.

And that's when randomness strikes: he hears Jesus say, do not fear, only believe. It sounds like a formula, doesn't it? Just believe hard enough, and your prayer will be answered. If you just have enough faith, things will turn out all right for you. Is that the formula we're looking for? It worked for Jairus. His daughter was saved, and it was a day the family never forgot - Hallelujah!

But it doesn't always work that way. In fact, most people don't get miracles like that, and it's really mean when some onlooker blames it on a lack of faith. I read recently the true

story of Jason Jones (*Limping but Blessed: Wrestling with God after the Death of a Child*, Fortress, 2017), a good evangelical (Baptist) father whose three-year-old son Jacob picked himself up after a Sunday nap and climbed unbeknownst into the family's SUV and somehow managed to lock all the doors so he couldn't get out. And before his parents went looking for him and found him there, he had suffocated in the heat of a Sunday afternoon. His father Jason prayed and cried and asked God for a miracle, and all he got, he said, was silence. "I begged and pleaded with God to show me something. But, God did not do anything. God did not give me a miracle. I didn't hear anything. I didn't see anything. I felt abandoned by God. The God who says, 'Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest,' wasn't offering me any comfort."

It's tempting for us to hear the story of Jairus again this morning and think faith works miracles (we so often say that, don't we?), but it isn't so. We maybe think faith works something like those strength tests you see at county fairs: it's a matter of hitting the thing hard enough with the sledgehammer so that it flies to the top and rings a bell and you win a prize. And if you don't succeed the first time, try again. Just believe hard enough, and you too can ring the bell. And if you can't ring the bell, well, you must not have enough strength, enough faith...no prize for you. Is this the way faith works? Most of us have lived long enough to know it doesn't work that way. We have learned that bad things often happen to good people ...and good things sometimes happen to bad people.

Faith doesn't work miracles. God does. Barbara Brown Taylor puts it nicely: "To concentrate on the strength of your faith [as if you can control what happens to you by your faith] is to practice magic," she says. "To concentrate on the strength of God [and the love and mercy of God] is to practice faith." The question is, Do you think your life is mainly in your hands, or do you think your life is mainly in God's hands? Faith doesn't work miracles. God does. We must be careful not to take credit for what God does. Faith is something that we do, miracles are what God does - but only sometimes: that's the problem. But here's the thing about faith. True faith is a funny thing. It knows how to pray...but it doesn't insist. Faith prays...but it doesn't say, You'd better do this for me or else. Faith asks God to look not at your virtue, your record, your faith, but to look at God's own mercy and compassion as we have come to know it in Jesus.

And this faith is ready to deal with randomness. If that's the way the world works, we'd better adjust. Miracles are hard to come by, and there may not be one for you or me, just as there wasn't one for Jason even though there was one for Jairus. And faith is ready and willing to accept that. Faith knows how to pray without insisting and how not to take credit for the outcome. So faith is ready to stay steady even when what Jesus does next is to walk into Jairus' daughter's room, close her eyes with his fingertips, and pull the sheet over her head. That's when faith itself becomes the miracle by believing she is still in God's good hands even though she has slipped out of her father's. We simply are not in complete control of our lives, and we have no business insisting on a miracle. Faith knows that, and faith persists in believing that no matter what.

Do you recall that wonderful hymn that begins:

When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, Whatever my lot thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul. (ELW, 785) The man (Horatio Spafford) who wrote that hymn, which we are about to sing, lived in Chicago and had just lost his four daughters when the ship taking them to Great Britain suddenly sank (in 1873). And that family tragedy was preceded by ten others, including the loss of much of his property in the Chicago Fire of 1871. That's the miracle of faith: learning to say, Whatever my lot...it's okay. Whatever my lot, it is well with my soul.

I'm sure you remember the time it happened to Jesus himself. The night before he died, the story goes, Jesus prayed for a miracle: "For you, Father, all things are possible. Remove this cup from me." (Mark 14:36) He meant the cup of suffering and death he saw coming his way. He wanted a miracle. But when he opened his eyes, the cup was still there. It was not removed. The miracle was denied. What did Jesus do then? He drank the cup, and in so doing he blazed the trail for you and me to have that kind of faith, no matter what. Jesus didn't die to let us off the hook. He died to show

us what faith is like and how it works. The Letter to the Hebrews calls Jesus by a name that we should be more familiar with. It calls him “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (12:2). That’s what it means to be a follower of Jesus: to believe the way he did. Jesus blazed the trail for us to believe like that, no matter what. Do not fear, only believe...whatever your lot. In other words, you may trust God with your life, and you may trust God with your death, too. That’s the miracle we all can have. Faith doesn’t work miracles. Faith no matter what is the miracle.

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