

# DRIVEN BY DESPERATION

Mark 5:21-43

Sunday, June 28, 2009

the Rev. James Campbell

Henry David Thoreau once famously said: "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them." I love that quote, but the truth is that sometimes my own desperation is not so quiet.

Sometimes it hangs out for everyone to see. It is not especially polite or patient or beautiful. But when you're desperate, you don't really care about what others think.

When I was a kid growing up in a preacher's house, I heard all kinds of things I probably wasn't supposed to. For the most part, my parents were very careful about what they said in front of their children, but every once in a while, a word or two would slip. One day, after my father had had a particularly taxing day at the office, he sighed at dinner and said: "I know the church is a hospital for the soul, but why does God always call me to the Intensive Care Unit?"

A hospital is not a bad analogy for the church. When the church is at its best, it's a place where bodies and minds and spirits and self-esteem are patched up,

put back together, mended, and made new. My dad's church was no exception. My childhood memories are saturated with a cast of characters who filled the pews on Sundays. Many of them were wonderful people. Some of them were deeply troubled people. All of them were there because they had found something that spoke to their souls, to their needs, to their sometimes desperate lives.

Last week, we heard the story of Jesus calming the storm. He spoke peace in the midst of chaos. Arriving on the other side of the lake, Jesus cast out demons from a deeply disturbed man, again speaking peace in the midst of chaos. The man had peace but the people on that side of the lake found it all quite disturbing and asked Jesus to leave. So off they were again, sailing back across the Sea of Galilee. And when they got to the other side, they were greeted by more desperate people.

In the midst of the chaos of that teeming crowd, a man named Jairus suddenly appeared. Jairus, whose name in Greek means "he who will be awakened" was the respected administrative head the synagogue, the most important institution of society. This well-heeled, respected man approached Jesus and fell at his feet, begging him repeatedly: "My little daughter is at the point of

death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.”

This was a shocking event, not because Jairus asked for a miracle, but because Jairus was there at all. Jesus was the kind of person Jairus attempted to keep out of the synagogue. Jesus was a rabble-rouser, a troublemaker, a dusty itinerate rabbi who was viewed as a threat to the system. But Jairus was driven by desperation. His desperation pushed him to his knees in front of Jesus. I imagine that the crowd was stunned into silence.

Jesus said he would go to Jairus’ house. And as he was on his way, in that crowd that surrounded him, there was a woman who had been sick for a very long time. She had been hemorrhaging slowly for 12 years. Her condition was akin to a continuous menstrual cycle, which according to Jewish law, made her unclean. Menstruating women were to be sequestered. And this poor woman, simply because she was sick, had been sequestered for 12 years. She was never permitted to go to the synagogue to worship. She was not permitted to mix in everyday village life. She lived as an outcast. Mark also tells us that she had spent all the money she had on the best medical treatment of her day, but in the end, all she got was more suffering.

So, with nothing to lose, she pushed herself into the crowd, enduring the people's scorn as they shouted at her: "Unclean!" But she was desperate and hoped against hope that if she could only touch the hem of Jesus' robe, she would be made well. She did, and she was. Jesus, knowing that power had passed between him and another person, looked around and asked: "Who touched my clothes?" His disciples, incredulous, responded: "What do you mean, who touched you? You are surrounded by people touching you." The woman, knowing the jig was up, came forward, fell before Jesus, and told him the whole truth of her desperate life and equally desperate act. Instead of judgment, she found in Jesus complete acceptance and mercy: "My daughter," he said: "your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed from your disease." The healing she received was not just in her body. When Jesus called her "my daughter," he placed her within his kinship, and since kinship was the paramount definition of one's social standing in ancient Palestine, those two words quite literally redefined her place in the community. Jesus healed her status as well.

Just then, some people came from Jairus' house and announced that his daughter was dead. Jesus didn't need to come after all. But Jesus turned to

Jairus and, as Barbara Brown Taylor says it, preached the shortest sermon of his career: "Don't fear, only believe." "Don't fear, only believe." The Bible repeats that admonition over and over again because we need to hear it over and over again. Upon his arrival, Jesus found a great commotion, weeping and wailing and professional mourners in abundance. Jesus said to them: "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead, but sleeping." And the shocked crowd laughed at him and thought he was crazy. Jesus sent them all out of the house. He took the grief-stricken mother and father, and a few of his disciples and went into the room where the little dead girl lay. He took her by the hand, and speaking tenderly in his native Aramaic said: "Talitha cumi" which literally means, "Little Lamb, arise." And to the utter amazement and relief of her parents, she did. Then Jesus told them to give the girl something to eat.

Two stories, woven into one - two very different people: the woman a social outcast; the man a mover and shaker of society; the woman not allowed to publicly worship; the man in charge of the public worship. There was nothing in their lives that should have ever brought them together, except that thing that brings all people together in the end; that thing we all have in common: the unpredictability and messiness of life. Both of these people's lives were

out of control. And driven by human need and fear; stripped of their pretensions and societal labels, they came to the One whom they hoped could speak peace in the midst of their personal chaos.

That's why people still come to Jesus. When life is going along swimmingly, most of us are content to make our relationship with God something that we add to an already busy, full life. Christ is not for us the Bread of Life, but the icing on the cake. But when life takes a turn for the worse, we seek that one who came to save the least and the lost. And that is all of us, at one time or another. Our desperation pushes us through our crowded lives and makes us reach out for this One whom we have heard cares about our every need.

The real difference between the sick woman and the well-placed religious leader is that the woman already knew how desperate her life had become. She had lived with it for 12 years. Jairus had no concept of how desperate his life could be until his child died. But both of them hoped that in this strange rabbi Jesus, this One who talked about the Reign of God in which all that is wrong will be made right, they would find the help they needed when life is chaos.

I live in that same hope, because life, as wonderful as it is, is also fragile and delicate. Each moment we spend with those we love is a precious gift.

Healthy bodies and minds are fragile things to be treasured. We know all that. And we also know that it will not always be so. And so here we are, gathered together, to seek to know and follow this strange Rabbi named Jesus just like the unnamed woman and the synagogue leader. We seek him because in him – in his words and actions we glimpse something of the grace of God, which Matthew Skinner has defined like this: “grace means that God has no task more urgent than to bend to assist those who seek help.”

So let us never be ashamed to ask for that help – when we’re desperate and when we’re not – because God will always bend to assist us. And in that bending we will find the hope and healing and strength we need for all the days of our lives yet to be. Thanks be to God. Amen.