

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Hanging on by a Thread”

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June 27, 2021

Mark 5:21-43

His name is Jairus. He is an important man, a leader in the synagogue. He's also desperate. His twelve-year old daughter is hanging on by a thread. She's dying. Jairus has access to the best medical resources available, and has, no doubt, tried them all, but nothing has worked. He is ready to move heaven and earth for his daughter, but all this dignified, respected man can do, in front of a great crowd, is throw himself at the feet of Jesus and beg. There are times when that's all any of us can do. Luther wrote, "Before the Lord, wir sind alle Bettler . . . we're all beggars." Whether looking for healing or forgiveness or salvation, we're all beggars before the Lord. "My little daughter is dying" Jairus says. "Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live."

Without a word, Jesus goes with him – a large crowd of the curious following along to see what would happen next. What happens next is another interruption. A sick woman sneaks up from behind and touches Jesus. This brings everything to a grinding halt. The emergency of this dying girl is put on hold.

Mark says she's been hemorrhaging for twelve years. Twelve years! Can you imagine her fatigue? She wakes up tired, never refreshed or restored. "She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse." Can you imagine the humility she suffered, the pain, the sorrow? Plus, there's another problem we sometimes miss. According to Jewish law, this woman's bleeding renders her religiously unclean. Because it never stopped, she could not participate in the monthly purification rights required for all Jewish women. She was therefore permanently "unclean." She was not allowed to be in the synagogue and was therefore looked down on and ostracized. According to Jewish law, anyone she touched would be polluted. That's why she's so secretive – sneaking up from behind. And that's also why she's terrified at having been discovered. Jesus knows what's happened. Turning around he asks, "Who touched my clothes?" It wasn't an accusatory question, but an invitation for the woman to confess her faith. The woman falls at his feet, trembling in fear and tells him everything.

In any event, it worked. Her bleeding stopped. Gone is the lethargy. Gone the relentless fatigue. Immediately she feels a vim and vigor and a liveliness she hasn't felt in twelve years. But the fact that an unclean woman has touched Jesus introduces another problem. The law is clear. He's supposed to stop whatever it is He is doing, take off his clothing, wash it, bathe himself, and withdraw from all human contact until sundown. Jesus is officially unclean. Now *He's* not supposed to touch anyone.

We've almost forgotten that Jesus had been hurrying to the house of Jairus to lay his hands on a dying girl. But He's unclean. He's not supposed to do that. Still, Jesus takes time to speak further with the woman, and surely, not all the conversation is recorded. (I imagine Jairus is quietly going nuts. Can't this wait?) But one of the things that is recorded are these sweet, impactful words to the woman. "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

Then comes yet another interruption, this time with the news Jairus fears the most. "Don't bother Jesus anymore. Your daughter is dead." Surely some glanced at that woman as if it were her fault; it's good Jesus shored her up with those words. Now Jesus turns to Jairus and says, "Don't be afraid. Just believe." He says that to a dad whose daughter just died.

Once again, Jesus sets out for Jairus' house. An unclean healer heads for the most ritually fastidious, religiously correct household in town, the house of Jairus, the leader of the synagogue. Upon arriving, He notices the commotion of friends, family, neighbors. They have already begun the highly ritualized mourning practices which were amped up because a child has died. There's weeping. There's wailing. It's loud and chaotic. Jesus enters and asks, "Why all this commotion and wailing? This child is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him. It's derisive and scornful laughter. They're mocking the naivety of Jesus. It's the wisdom of the world sort of laughter against the foolishness of God. Jesus pays them no attention but drives them out of the house. Inside, it's just Jairus, his wife, and a few disciples. He goes back to where the child is. He takes the child by the hand. (That too is against the law. If she's dead, she's as unclean as the bleeding woman back there.) In any event, Jesus takes the girl by the hand, and says, "Talitha cumi," which means, "Little one, get up." Immediately she stands and starts walking around. All are astonished, except for Jesus. Now, sounding more like an ordinary physician, He says, "Give her something to eat."

What happened? I don't know how he did all this; Jesus never explains any of His miracles. The better question is what is God saying to us with this story? There's so much here.

First this: there will always be those who laugh at Jesus in derision. There will always be those who think they know better. . . dupes who have been led to believe that God doesn't exist, or if he does, he doesn't have the will or the power or the love to intervene in human affairs. Jesus drove those scoffers out of Jairus' home. Don't you pay much attention to them either. Their derisive laughter will one day end. But for those who die in the Lord . . . and are raised, that's when a different kind of laughter, a joyous laughter begins in earnest. So don't let the scoffers ruin your faith . . . or even your day.

Second: it is good and right to look to God and to pray for intervention. For sure, seek help from doctors and therapists, but don't put your ultimate hopes in them. Don't take our dear Lord out of the equation. Both Jairus and the woman were right to turn to Jesus. They placed that faith squarely on Him and were not disappointed.

Third, Jairus had a name, status, and the respect of the community. The woman? We don't know her name. We only know about her illness and the stigma attached to it. Jesus treated both of them with love and respect. We don't know her name, but, in front of the whole crowd he called her "daughter". With a single word, he restores and honors her.

Fourth, after word came that the little girl had died, Jesus said to Jairus, "Don't be afraid; just believe." That tells us something about the faith God wants us to have. Faith is believing even when there are no apparent miracles. Faith is trusting God even when our fervent pleas to God are not answered the way we think they should be. Faith is persistence in prayer and even praise also when we do not receive what we ask for. Faith is claiming for ourselves the peace and wellness God gives us even as we lay dying. Faith is believing in Jesus even when he comes at the last minute, or even after the last minute.

Fifth, no one likes interruptions, no one. But it's usually in the interruptions that we are given opportunities to serve others. Jesus keeps getting interrupted in this lesson. In fact, in Mark, the ministry of Jesus often feels like one big chain of interruptions. And yet, not once does Jesus complain about being interrupted. Instead, he takes hold of those interruptions.

Theologian Henri Nouwen told a wonderful story about one of his teachers, a professor from Notre Dame, who said to him, "You know, my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that interruptions were my work." Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "We must not . . . assume that our schedule is our own to manage, [we should] allow it to be arranged by God." One more from C.S. Lewis, "We must stop regarding unpleasant or unexpected things as interruptions of real life. The truth is that interruptions *are* real life, the life God is sending." What is *not* real life is insisting we don't have time to serve others, especially when we spend so much of it watching streaming shows. Serving others will never, ever be convenient. The deep needs of people will never wait for the slow parts of your day. If you want to serve as Jesus served, get used to the idea of it being inconvenient, awkward and messy. It makes me think of Ephesians 2, "We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Finally, no matter what your situation in life, there is hope because of the grace of your Savior Jesus Christ. In our text, three individuals are hanging on by a thread: Jairus, his daughter, and the woman. They're just barely hanging in there. But there is no human condition so bad or so awful that hope is absent. Even death is not outside the reach of God's authority and love and grace.

Sometimes *you and I* may feel like we're hanging on by a thread. If you're the parent of a teenager who refuses to listen, but insists on learning things the hard way, it may feel like you're hanging by a thread.

It can feel that way for single parents too, being pulled in so many different directions, trying to make ends meet in a lopsided economic recovery. Young couples who'd like to start a family and buy a home but are weighed down with student loans and are priced out of the housing market. The octogenarian couple with a never-ending string of appointments with specialists. The leadership of the small church whose members slipped away during the pandemic and can't be found. Turns out most of us know the feeling of hanging by a thread.

It's not a secure position. Unless, of course, the thread on which you are hanging is connected to Jesus. That's how it was for the people in our text. The thread they reached out to was wrapped around the Son of God. Reasoning that even Jesus' clothing could help her, the woman touched His threads and found healing. Believing Jesus had the power to heal his daughter, Jairus fell at the feet of Jesus and begged. And the little girl? She simply heard Him speak her back to life with his Word. Each of them found the help they needed in Jesus.

And so when you are facing great challenges, when your prospects are poor and the outlook bleak, hang on to the grace and promises of God in Jesus Christ. He loves you. He has the power to prosper you and has promised to heal you, if not now, then when He returns. He raised Jairus' daughter from death and promises resurrection to you through Christ. He will make things right again. So . . . hang on to Jesus. Cling to Him with faith and confidence. Cry out to Him for help. Trust He has come for you and will come again. The same heart that cared for Jairus and his daughter and the bleeding woman, cares also, for you. Amen.