

## The Secret Message of Jesus: “Do Not Fear, Only Believe”

Luke 8:40-55

<sup>40</sup>Now when Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed him, for they were all waiting for him. <sup>41</sup>Just then there came a man named Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He fell at Jesus' feet and begged him to come to his house, <sup>42</sup>for he had an only daughter, about twelve years old, who was dying.

As he went, the crowds pressed in on him. <sup>43</sup>Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. <sup>44</sup>She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. <sup>45</sup>Then Jesus asked, “Who touched me?” When all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you.” <sup>46</sup>But Jesus said, “Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me.” <sup>47</sup>When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. <sup>48</sup>He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.”

<sup>49</sup>While he was still speaking, someone came from the leader's house to say, “Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the teacher any longer.” <sup>50</sup>When Jesus heard this, he replied, “Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved.” <sup>51</sup>When he came to the house, he did not allow anyone to enter with him, except Peter, John, and James, and the child's father and mother. <sup>52</sup>They were all weeping and wailing for her; but he said, “Do not weep; for she is not dead but sleeping.” <sup>53</sup>And they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. <sup>54</sup>But he took her by the hand and called out, “Child, get up!” <sup>55</sup>Her spirit returned, and she got up at once. Then he directed them to give her something to eat. <sup>56</sup>Her parents were astounded; but he ordered them to tell no one what had happened.

Luke 10:9 – “Heal the sick... and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’”

Back in the days when passenger trains had upper and lower sleeping compartments in their Pullman cars, a mother had put her little daughter to bed for the night in the upper berth. As she tucked her in and gave her a good-night kiss, the mother said, “Good night, sweetheart. Sleep well. God will watch over you.”

Some moments later, when everything and everyone was quiet in the darkened car, the voice of the little girl was heard as she said, “Mommy, are you there?” “Yes, dear, I am here. And God is watching over you,” came the reassuring voice of her mother from the lower compartment. After a few moments the tender voice was once again heard, “Daddy are you there?” “Yes, honey, Daddy's here. Now go to sleep, darling.”

About a half minute later the anxious little voice was heard once again, “Mommy, are you still there?” And from out of the darkness from the next cabin came a stern male voice: “Your mother is here and your father is here. We are all here! So stop being afraid! Go to sleep!” After a long silence, the little girl with trembling voice asked, “Mommy? Was that God?”

That young girl didn't make such a bad guess. For how often in scripture are we told ‘Do not be afraid’? From the first time God spoke to Abraham in Genesis to the final

words of Christ in the book of Revelation, these exact words are used 59 times in the Bible, 18 times in the New Testament alone. An additional 43 times, God, or God's emissaries declare "Do not fear!" Ten times we're told "Do not worry!" And this isn't even counting the times we're told "Do not be anxious," "Be at peace," or "Have faith."

We are living in days of great anxiety and fear. In the past week, I've seen a couple of news reports on the increasing numbers of people have gone to a counselor or therapist because of their anxiety and fear. Primarily people fear they will lose their job. Or they've lost their job and don't know how they are going to cover their mortgage or simple living expenses. Or they've been diagnosed with an illness and, while being resolved to fight it and win, are fearful about what the future will bring. Others experience anxiety for their children, grandchildren, even great-grandchildren, for their health, their relationships, their jobs, their security, their decisions.

If you're experiencing increased fear or anxiety, I hope you know there's abundant support available. As you can tell from our extensive list of prayer concerns this morning, your pastors and parish nurse do whatever we can when we know someone is in need. Our Stephen Ministers, from whom we heard this morning, have a tremendous impact in working one-on-one with individuals. We have wonderful counselors who are members of our church who are willing to work within the financial needs of those they see. Our congregation is part of the Church Assistance Program at Pine Rest which assures at least a couple of free sessions for anyone in need. We have an effective network of care. Remember this: recognizing that you need help is not a sign of weakness – it's a sign of strength. Often we wrestle with being overcome with fear and the decision to move forward by faith. And the decision to be well is a choice we all must make, a choice for life.

One of the most poignant scenes of a man wrestling with the tension between fear and faith is found in the gospel story from Luke. Jairus, a leader in the synagogue, is a desperate parent – as any of us would be. He literally throws himself at the feet of this wandering preacher with a reputation for healing and begs Jesus to come to his house and heal his little girl. And Jesus responds compassionately and agrees to go with him to his house to see his daughter.

Then, just as suddenly, there's a disruption. A woman sneaks up on Jesus and – in great hope and faith – simply touches the hem of his garment. Power goes out of him and Jesus immediately knows there's been a healing. It's a stealth act of faith. Jesus stops the procession, and turns toward the crowd and demands, "Who touched me?"

Now this unnamed woman had been hemorrhaging blood for twelve years. And her condition has made her a pariah, an outcast. The Jewish Law prescribed that she be marginalized. She was ritually unclean. Anyone who touched her was also unclean. She could not do what the religious law required: a monthly ritual of cleansing, which made a woman ritually, religiously clean again. Worst of all, she was not permitted to enter the synagogue because of her condition. Imagine being legally forbidden from entering this church because of a medical condition you may have. It doesn't take much imagination to understand this woman's terrible isolation, the guilt imposed on her by her religion, rubbed in every day by a community that would have nothing to do with her. So she, like

Jairus, is desperate, and seeks help in Jesus.

When Jesus asked “Who touched me?” those hard-headed disciples say “Everyone was pushing in on you, Lord! It’s silly to ask who touched you!” And Luke tells us that the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. She expects his anger, his judgment. How dare she taint the rabbi’s purity? She falls trembling at his feet. But Jesus praises her. “Daughter,” he says – a word that includes her in the family of faith – “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.”

I hope it is not lost on us that Jesus has bridged a social and religious barrier to a marginalized, rejected outcast and restores her to wholeness and welcomes her to the kingdom of God, where there are no outcasts. It is impossible to read this without a new sense that it is the work of the church that bears his name not to invest all its energy in protecting its purity, but to live out its life opening its doors, opening its arms, to welcome all in his name, particularly those who are marginalized and outcast.

And let me say a word of appreciation for this anonymous woman. She wanted to be healed and, like Jairus, when she saw her chance she jumped at it. Good for her! That intellectual gadfly, Ashley Montague, once suggested that every one of us suffer from what he calls “Psychosclerosis,” a hardening not of the arteries but of one’s mental attitudes and one’s heart. Those who suffer from psychosclerosis have learned to live with their psychological or spiritual condition and find that it’s easier to remain sick than to risk being healed. Whether it’s a matter of being chronically angry, or judgmental, or impatient, or unloving, sometimes it’s more comfortable to remain afflicted than to dare enter the unknown condition of being healed. Psychosclerosis recognizes that it’s terrifying to move into a new way of being – and we become deathly afraid of change. It’s not that our physical or spiritual condition is easy to live with, Montague says, but that it’s easier to live with what we know rather than to risk being healed.

How easy it would have been for this woman to stay mired in her condition and just fatalistically said “This is what’s meant to be.” But she took the difficult road of taking responsibility for herself. She took the risk of being healed, of jumping into the unknown of a different way of life. It was very much leap of faith. And we might do well to follow her example, to dare to jump at the possibility of healing and wholeness rather than be stuck in the conditions and ruts that have long ensnared us.

Jesus repeatedly cautions us against letting fear eat away at the heart of our being. Fear is like a prison that keeps us penned in, away from the freedom of faith. Jesus attempts to show us a vision of living under God’s dominion, in the wholeness of faith, in the completeness of God’s shalom. In today’s reading, we’re urged to open our eyes to what is so near to us. To open our minds to the enormity of a world, a creation, we scarcely comprehend. The Kingdom, the dominion of God, is all around us. It’s an Open Secret. We’re repeatedly told of it – but we refuse to trust what we have heard so it remains hidden from our lives. This unnamed woman caught a glimpse of that Kingdom of God – and her faith overcame her fear.

Now, lest we forget, there’s also a girl to be healed, one who can not act for herself. I can just imagine that Jairus is about to be sick. For remember, please, Jesus is

now unclean. He's been touched by an unclean woman, and he's now entering the house of a leader of the synagogue, a fastidious keeper of the Holiness Code. Nothing in this house is unclean – except Jesus. The law is clear about this. Jesus should stop, retire, take off his clothes, wash them, bathe – and enter no house until sundown. Instead, he continues on with Jairus as an unclean, contaminated, unholy man. How can he bring life?

They start up their little procession and immediately messengers appear. “It’s too late,” they say, “Your little girl has died.” Sweet Jesus has taken his sweet time, and mourners are already there, weeping, funeral arrangements are underway as, of course, she must be buried by sundown. Yet Jesus simply turns to Jairus and says “Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved.”

Arriving at the house, those inside are weeping for the child, overcome by grief. Jesus tells them “Do not weep. She is only sleeping.” And they laugh at him. They think he’s delusional – and it’s likely we do as well. But he takes her small hand and once again says something intimate and affectionate: “Little girl” – precisely, “little lamb” – “get up!” And she does get up, and walks around and, with utter practicality, Jesus tells her parents to get her something to eat.

How different these stories are. One healing is tucked inside the other. One woman doesn’t even bother to ask – and she’s healed. A father begs for healing on behalf of a daughter who is beyond all asking, and she’s healed. Do you notice? Jesus does not put any pre-condition on their being healed. Jesus didn’t make that woman to recite some elaborate ritual or demand money from her. Jesus didn’t wait for this Jairus to think it all through and confess Jesus to be the Messiah. Jesus doesn’t have any of these folks confess their sins or pray the “sinners prayer.” The power of God is simply available to two people who dare to have a little faith. That’s all. Two people are willing to believe. That’s the real miracle.

Now, we’ll always wrestle with why some people are healed and not others. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “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. Jesus’ miracles remind us that the way things are is not the way they always will be.” So Jesus’ ‘miracles’ are themselves a glimpse of the unseen reign of God.

This is what I see: there is a reality, an ultimate reality, that surrounds us. It’s as real now as it has ever been. Jesus – and other teachers – keep telling us about it. It’s as if each Sunday Jesus comes running down the aisles of the church begging us to hear what we’re being told and see what his teachings point to. If we could only stop being gripped by our anxiety and fear we’d start to see it. Had we had just a little faith, small as that tiny mustard seed, we’d start to believe. And as we begin to believe, this new reality can be born in you and me.

The grace and power of God surround us. And it doesn’t wait upon our purity or righteousness. What might it mean for us if we could see beyond the fear that grips us so tightly? How might we live if we could shake off that Psychosclerosis – that attitudinal hardness – that starves our spirits? Perhaps we might find wholeness for our anxious lives. Perhaps it means that our troubled minds, broken hearts and tormented souls can

be healed. Most assuredly we'd discover the life that God intends for you and me. For the power and life we can find is an open secret, if we would not fear, but believe.