

## “The Power of Faith”

Text: Mark 5:21-43 (<https://bible.oremus.org/?ql=572842604>)

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Do you want help? What are you willing to do for it?

Let's start with those questions to try to appreciate what's going on in the reading from scripture this morning, and how that teaching might apply to our own lives.

Jesus is on the other side of the Sea of Galilee – the “other” other side, as Francis called it last week, where he's developed quite a reputation for himself as both a teacher and a healer – a twofer, if you like. Ordinarily, you could expect one or the other – someone deeply versed in the Yahwistic faith of Israel and an authority on its history and interpretation, OR, a physician, someone expert in physical healing.

But with Jesus you get the full Monty – a person entirely oriented toward the restoration of God's *shalom*, God's peace, God's wholeness, in all of God's children, a kind of peace which Paul said “passes all understanding.” Today, we call that holistic healing – healing the kinds of things we can see under a microscope and the kinds of things we can't. We all know that we need that kind of healing because there is no way to explain the sorry state of the world, based as it is on the sorry state of individual lives, by peering at our cells through a microscope. It's a different kind of healing we need – spiritual health that leads to physical health – and Jesus was adept at restoring both.

This healing-within-a-healing story is about, among other things, initiative – desperate people taking the initiative to reach out for help to the one they have heard might be able to help them. Jairus wants help for his unnamed daughter, and the woman with the blood condition wants help for herself, and I want to spend the rest of this sermon focusing on the unnamed grown woman, because the theologians who gave us the Gospel of Mark knew that sometimes less is more: less detail in a story, such as omitting this woman's name, provides more white space where people can write their own names as a way of entering into the experience that the story relates. And that, finally, is the only reason the stories of Jesus were preserved at all: so that we can write ourselves into the spiritual realities of those stories.

We believe that the spiritual realities contained in and conveyed by the stories of Jesus are as available to us as they were to those who first experienced them. We believe that there are realities in this world of time and space that are not limited by time and space. Love is one of those realities. Love is love regardless of time and space. Love was love then regardless of when “then” was. Love will be love ages from now, no matter how many ages away that may be. Love was love in Galilee, where Jesus taught and healed, and love is love here at 5312 Mayfield Road. Love is love when a parent peers into a bassinet at their sleeping child, and love is love when a volunteer helps an inmate put together a resume in a high-security prison.

Love is no respecter of boundaries, which is good when we're talking about Maria and Tony in *West Side Story*, but not so good when we're talking about love that is unrequited, abused, or exploited. It takes tremendous grace, courage, and strength to love without the expectation of anything in return, and very few of us human beings, across thousands of years and many cultures, have been able to embody that kind of love. Jesus was one of those few.

And that's what we see him doing in today's reading: showing the kind of love God shows for us and the kind of love God calls us to show for one another and all of God's creation – including ourselves. That's the part that many of us forget or badly distort – loving ourselves as God loves us and showing that same kind of love toward others. Without that altruistic self-regard – a self-regard stripped of egotistical and narcissistic self-centeredness – we cannot love others as God calls us to. That's why Jesus said, quoting Leviticus, “and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.”

And that's where the initiative of the nameless woman in our story comes in, because she has enough self-regard to know that she needs help and she has resolved, as best she can, to help herself

with God's help. She has tried the appropriate avenue for help for so long and at such personal expense that she has impoverished herself. She is desperate, but she has not succumbed to despair because she knows that life was not meant to be this way for her, she has heard that Jesus shares that view, and she has taken the initiative to see if what she has heard is true.

And so she screws up her courage and exercises what my grandmother called "gumption." She overcame the barriers imposed by her culture and by her own fear and she reached out to the one she believed – trusted – could help her. And he did. And in response to her initiative, Jesus told her who the faith-healer really was: "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

According to Jesus, it was the woman's faith, not Jesus' touch, that made her well. It was her trust in the good news she'd heard about Jesus from others that allowed her to push her way through the throng just to make contact with the hem of Jesus' tunic in her desperate hope that her life could be better than it was. And she did not hope in vain.

Friends, there are many layers of truth in this healing story inside another healing story, and one of them is about the power of faith. The faith of the unnamed woman is the power that allows people to recover lives lost to sickness, to injury, to addiction, to estrangement, to conflict, to poverty, and to any other kind of brokenness that keeps us from living as God wills us to live. That power is available to all, but without exercising that power, there is no salvation. The light and warmth of God's love is always there, just as the sun is always there, but if we wish to receive its benefits, we have to turn toward it. The loving shepherd always seeks the lost, but only the sheep who respond to the shepherd's voice can expect to be saved. We have a role to play in our own salvation.

"God helps those who help themselves," is the folk wisdom spun from this story, and indeed, God does. God helps those who wish to be helped to live in the image and likeness of the One who created them and who calls them into a relationship of *shalom* – that peace that passes understanding.

So I ask in closing as I asked in starting: Do you want help? What are you willing to do for it? Are you willing to turn toward the light not just with words but with actions? Are you willing to make the changes for the better that will allow you to grow in grace, trust, and commitment to God's way? Are you willing to risk a relationship, a pattern of being, security, or an identity in order to say yes to God's will for your good? Are you willing?

At least one of us was, a long time ago in Galilee, and we don't even know her name. But as Jesus said of another woman whose name is no longer known to us, ""She has done a beautiful thing. . . Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached in all the world, what she has done will be told in memory of her" (Mt 26:10a, 13). Let us remember the unnamed woman whom Jesus healed because of her initiative. Let us remember and give thanks for her witness to the gospel of loving God above all else and of loving one's neighbor as one loves oneself.