

Reaching Out

Mark 5:21-43

Cradock Presbyterian Church

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This double-story is one of my top-most-favorite passages in all the Bible. I've preached it I don't know how many times. It's never occurred to me, until now, that a major theme in these stories is the idea of people *reaching out*. It's a basic human thing! *Everyone* reaches out to others, at least once in a while, because we all have times when we need to reach out. And we all feel moved, from time to time, to reach out to help someone whose plight touches us. This story connects to us today.

Thing is, people back then tried to be independent, nearly as much as we do! They wanted to handle their problems on their own; but sometimes, oftentimes, that wasn't going to happen, and they would find that out. That meant desperation. That desperation became the strong motivation for "reaching out." And the more desperate you were, the further out you would reach. Are you feeling a connection with those folks back there yet?

Now the scene in our story isn't unusual. Jesus is in the middle of his "healing tour" in the early part of Mark's gospel, cruising around Galilee, healing miraculously and teaching large crowds. He's on the way into town, apparently, when Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, no less, somebody who by this time ought to be *opposed* to Jesus, comes and *falls down at his feet*. He *begs him repeatedly*, as the text says, and that couldn't have been easy; being leader of the synagogue would have been a position of some prestige! some power and wealth! There's the sense, too, in the original language

that the begging was intense, and prolonged. Jairus, this big important man, was *groveling*. He was a living example of desperation.

What would drive a man like Jairus to do this? What would break him down to the point of overcoming the social pressures on him NOT to seek out this rebel rabbi from Nazareth? What would anguish him enough to make him swallow his pride of place, and drive him to the ground in front of this itinerant preacher? He had to overcome a lot, to reach out this hard!

The one thing that would drive him to this point was how much he loved his little daughter. We never get her name, but that's okay. It's enough to know that Jairus loved her so much he'd do anything for her – even swallow his pride, set aside whatever his fellow synagogue people might think, and put himself in the hands of this guy Jesus.

Of course, Jesus responded like he always does. When somebody reaches out like that, he reaches back. He went with Jairus, even though we have a little interruption in the story. Mark was a great editor, and he made sure we knew all about this interruption; this little interlude tells us a lot about Jesus, about reaching out, healing, and faith. The interruption came from another absolutely desperate person.

By now, we know that Jesus was getting much closer to town. Obviously, he'd have to be, if he was following Jairus to his house. So the crowd was getting bigger, and more raucous. The words in the original language paint a picture of something like a cross between a mosh pit and a riot. People were going a little crazy! So getting anywhere near Jesus was like taking your life in your own hands.

Which was just what this one poor woman did. She had had a flow of blood, we read, for 12 years. I think it's best just to read the 12 years as a piece of historical information. Commentators can't agree on what symbolism "twelve" might mean here, though some of them try to make a big deal out of it. But the irony seems clear: since Jewish boys and girls were considered adults at 12, that means that for an entire lifetime, this woman had had a flow of blood. You talk about things to overcome! Here are a few. She would have been marked as unclean, so she'd have been a social outcast. They figured in those days that all misfortunes were brought about by sin, so she'd have been branded a sinner. Losing that much blood is bound to make you weak, so there was that problem. And here was this absolute *crush* of people she had to get through to get to Jesus! She could get stomped to death! Never mind that she wasn't supposed to be approaching a teacher of the law; women weren't allowed to do that. For her to do what she planned to do meant she was going to possibly make the great teacher *unclean*. And in the end, she couldn't know how Jesus might react.

All these things to overcome, and for what? For a *chance* that she might be healed? Friends, that's not just reaching out – that's *reaching out in faith!*

Do you see what's in common here? For both Jairus and the woman with the flow of blood – can we just call her "Flo?" – their desperation drove them to take risks. They couldn't leave things as they were. But they knew they couldn't handle things on their own. They knew only one person to whom they could reach out – Jesus.

I pause and think about what life is like in the modern world, in America in 2012. Some of you have come face-to-face with desperate people. You've seen people who

come here looking for help, needing money to keep the electricity turned on in the middle of winter, or else they'll freeze; or a bag of groceries, so they and their kids won't starve; or even prayer because they've got someone sick in another state, and they know they can't get there, they just want to pray and have someone pray with them and for them. If you watch the news, you know how many people are out there in a desperate way. And things aren't getting better! Yet what do most of them think? They don't want to ask for help, not really; it's so ingrained in their being that "you have to make it on your own, you have to be self-sufficient" that reaching out for help – well, that's a lot to overcome. Even worse, they might even think that God has abandoned them; so they're afraid to reach out for the one thing they absolutely need: Jesus Christ. At least Jairus and "Flo" knew, on some level, that they could reach out to Jesus. What do our modern people think?

Of course, any miracle story always has a "solution," a place in the narrative where it all comes out all right. There's always a place where the reaching out is met by a "reaching back." The woman makes it through the crushing, moving crowd and gets through to Jesus. She thinks, "If I can even just touch the fringe on his garment, I'll be healed." Jewish men wore a little fringe on the hem of their outer robes; it had some religious significance that I've long ago forgotten. But it was very much like the fringe you'd put on a drape, or like the fringe on my stoles or on the pulpit paraments. Very small and hard to touch! But this woman managed to touch the fringe, just as she'd planned. She *didn't* plan on what happened when she did.

Immediately, says the text, the woman felt herself healed. *Immediately*. But something else happened immediately, too. Jesus knew that “power” had gone out from him. Of course it did! It was the power of faith. And faith has the power to make us whole, to heal us, to save us. That’s what that one word in the original means, you know, it has all of those meanings: make whole, heal, save.

But wait a minute! Sometimes you can overreach. And maybe this woman has just done it. Jesus starts turning around in the crowd and asking, “Who touched me?” Sounds like kids in the back seat, on a long car trip, doesn’t it? “Stop touching me!” “He touched me!” “Stop touching her!” But this was serious. When you read this story for the first time, you’re caught up in the drama. I mean, this is the *Son of God* here! You don’t just go grabbing the Son of God! What’s going to happen? This would make a good serial for TV, you know? “Tune in next week to see what Jesus does with this woman who touched him!”

If you’d have been paying attention throughout the gospel, though, you’d have known what was going to happen. Jesus was pleased at this woman’s faith, and he wanted to do some reaching out of his own. See, when you reach out to someone, it’s really important that they reach back! The woman was truthful. Even though she was *really* afraid, she came and told it all – just like I think Jesus had hoped she would. Then he reached out to love her in a powerful way: “Daughter,” he said, and that’s a *powerful* term of affection, “your faith has” – and here’s that word again, it could mean saved, or made whole, or “made you well. Go *in peace*, and *be healed* of your disease.” The idea of “peace” for Hebrew people meant total well-being, something more than just not

having a disease. When you put that together with Jesus calling her “daughter,” it’s clear he was reaching out to “Flo” in a way she’d probably never been reached out to in her entire life.

Well, but the story of Jairus’ daughter picks right up again. As soon as “Flo” has been healed and a blessing pronounced, some of the people from Jairus’ house come to him and say, “Your daughter has died.” Too bad – no miracle for you, Jairus. That’s what they probably thought when they said, “Why trouble the teacher any further?” Jesus needed to reach out, to take a risk, himself. He needed to reach out to one who was desperate, and draw him into his circle. He needed to show him how to believe. Jesus told him, “Do not doubt, only believe,” to set up what would follow. We don’t have to go into any of the delicious details of the rest of the story – read them for yourselves, the verses are listed in your bulletin, you can take that home and look it up in your own Bible. The bottom line of the story is this: Jesus *reached out* and took the little girl’s hand. Then he uttered words of command: “Little girl, get up!” – and she did it. *She reached back*, from death, to life, because Jesus took the risk and reached out to her. It was a risk, all right – the people from the synagogue were there, and when he suggested to them that he was going to raise her (“She’s only sleeping,” he said), they were already laughing at him. They just didn’t understand.

See, I think people make fun of us because they don’t understand what we’re doing. We’re reaching out to offer life instead of death. We refuse to accept the world’s answers, like those synagogue people did, so lots of people write us off. But we know the eyes of desperation, Even more, we know the eyes and heart of faith. Sometimes

people will reach out to us in easy-to-see ways, that's true. Sometimes it won't be so easy to see, but they'll be reaching nonetheless. And sometimes they'll need us to reach for them. God will guide us and tell us what to do. Then will God's healing and salvation move closer to being complete.

See, Jesus Christ has reached out to us in a way that no one or nothing else in the world can do. We have been offered eternal life if we'll just believe in him; his Spirit, to help us, heal us, make life better while we're here, and a body of believers, his church, to live in. We have been "made whole" in that way; "saved" from life that could be as desperate as anything you'd read anywhere in Scripture – or in our modern media. So what does all of this mean for us?

First, it means that you and I can always reach out for Jesus Christ. Your station in life can be high and mighty, like Jairus', or lowly, like Flo's, it doesn't matter. You can always reach out to him. Second, you can rest assured that he'll reach back. Jesus loves it when we reach out to him in faith. Flo did it behind his back, but she did it with faith, and look what happened! You can expect no less for yourself. Jesus is eager to be sought, eager for you to go to great lengths to get to him; and more than ready to forgive a few things when you do. Finally, he's ready to use you as a witness to the power of reaching out to him, and being reached and healed. This is all about faith. We can be the people of faith that others in this world reach out to, who can help them reach out to Jesus.

Reaching out, being reached, being healed. That's life in the kingdom...