

*Daughters of Faithfulness, Sisters in Suffering*

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

Beth Carroll

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Text: Mark 5:21-43

I have a complicated relationship with faith, sometimes mistaking it for some sort of fickle feeling. At times I feel it in spades in my life, especially when things are going well. My kids are healthy. I have a wonderful new husband. I have a job I love in a church I love with people I love. Ask me during a season like this if God keeps God's promises to care for me and I can feel with great authority, "yes! God loves me, wants good for me, and works out even the bad things in my life for good!" I can be the best cheerleader for God ever. But how about when things are going poorly? Like that time I lost my job or lost my dog or lost my first marriage or just felt...lost? I feel more like David when he says in Psalm 13: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?" My feelings of faith have flown out the window. Can any of you relate to this?

In fact, I think "faith" is one of the most curious aspects of Christianity. The word faith gets thrown around a lot, but I am not sure we always have a rooted understanding of what it is. People say things like "just have a bit more faith" or "All we need is the faith of a mustard seed" in the face of obstacles or immense loss; as if faith were just a few spare coins we can dig up from under the sofa cushions to put in the Magic God vending machine to make all things shiny and new in our lives. Personally, I have had seasons of only finding potato chip crumbs and a couple ball point pens under my cushions. When I wanted to feel faith, there was none to be found. Do you know what I mean?

So all of this begs to question, what is faith and how does it connect to all the collective areas where we need healing from God? First how do different theologians define faith? John Calvin says faith is "founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit." In other words, faith is a trust in God's goodness that is given to us in our hearts and mind and is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is not something I muster up from my nasty seat cushions; it starts with God instead of

me. Reformed theologian Karl Barth echoes this when he says “Christian faith is the gift of the meeting in which people become free to hear the word of grace which God has spoken in Jesus Christ in such a way that, in spite of all that contradicts it, they may once for all exclusively and entirely, hold to His promise and guidance.”

I love this idea about faith. Barth describes faith as a sense of freedom that is ours through Jesus that even when life all around us seems to logically deny God’s power and work, we are given the strength to keep on keeping on anyway. God’s spirit gives us faith to believe God is good even when our surroundings, our loved ones, and even our own minds betrays this. As the book of Hebrews teaches, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”. Faith is a gift given to us by Jesus that allows us to believe that somehow, somewhere there is a glorious light at the end of even the longest and blackest tunnel and that all we need to do is to keep walking step by step until it finds us.

We have a great example of this with our story about the woman whom Jesus calls daughter today. I think if we only read this passage superficially, we can fall into a false sense of faith as magic, by thinking this is a simple faith transaction. Our heroine is sick, has faith that if she touches Jesus’s clothes she can be well, and her wish for healing is granted. But one thing we cannot overlook is that she was sick for TWELVE YEARS. For twelve years, despite being separated from her community and suffering in her illness, she had enough faith to keep seeking help. To keep going to doctors, to be resourceful, to be creative, even when no healing seemed to be in sight. Even though everything in her day to day world contradicted the presence of faith, we see the evidence of how God’s spirit is at work in her. Her faith isn’t only tied to her healing, its tied to who she was twelve years ago and who she was in the midst of the struggle. Its tied to her willingness to trust that God is good and would sustain her, even if her bad health was to be her lot for the rest of her life. It’s the small inward voice telling her she is a daughter even though the outside voices called her “unclean”. This daughter kept walking through her dark tunnel trusting there was a light, even if it would never result in a literal physical healing. It was her faith that allowed her to fight. It was her faith that sustained her in her isolation. It was her faith that emboldened her to approach Jesus, even if it meant punishment for making those she pushed through unclean. It is her faith that drew her to

Jesus, and it is her faith that gave her peace to speak truth to him, even though she was fearful.

“Nevertheless she persisted” indeed.

Now lets look at Jairus and his daughter. There is a different manifestation of faith here. If the hemorrhaging woman endured twelve years of suffering, Jairus celebrated twelve years of joy as a parent. Jairus has every resource of his day available to him, as a man of authority. Perhaps like me, he felt filled with faith when life was going well. However, this is not enough to prevent the loss of his twelve-year-old daughter. Here is a person who values faith as a leader of the synagogue and it is his faith that humbles him to throw himself at Jesus’s feet and beg for help. What amazes me about Jairus is that we hear nothing of him complaining when Jesus stops to help the bleeding woman; prioritizing a person who is on the complete opposite end of their society hierarchy. As a parent, I can only imagine the panic and primal urgency he must have felt, which probably only crescendoed as he watched Jesus stop what he was doing to help the woman. And then to hear that Jesus was “too late” that his daughter had died? It must have been the worst kind of despair. It interests me that Jesus’s response to him is “do not fear, *only* believe”. It is not “do not fear, so you can believe” Or “Either fear or believe”. It is a recognition that in Jairus’s spirit existed fear AND belief. Jesus is not saying Jairus has lost faith, he is saying that though you are filled with dread and fear and panic and all the feelings that are opposite of what we associate with feelings of faith, you can trust the faith that has you and is in you. Jairus trusts Jesus and leads him to his home where his daughter has died, with no guarantees that Jesus will or even can do what he says he can do. His faith compels him to keep walking down his dark tunnel towards the draw of a future light.

With all of this in mind, how do we live in faith? Because lets face it, just as many of us can celebrate all of the times God’s hand has guided and helped us at just the right time, we all know what its like to feel that prayers have gone unanswered, healing has passed us by, or the sting of long term illness and death.

We don’t have faith, faith has us.

The same Holy Spirit that fills us with faith, is the same Holy Spirit that goes before us before suffering, enters into it with us, and leads the way forward in

God's abundance and wholeness, even when we have endured great loss and even when there is no guarantee of the outcome we prefer.

As a pastor who spends a chunk of time with young adults who have either left the church out of frustration over social and political issues or even left the church because it has caused them great harm or abuse, I find they are unafraid to ask the hard questions that many of us think but don't always voice. Questions like "why does God allow suffering or evil?" Just as I don't pretend to fake an answer to this to my honest agnostic and atheist friends, I won't fake an answer to you.

I don't know why we suffer. I don't know why the healing offered to the hemorrhaging woman and the daughter of Jairus is granted to them but sometimes seems to elude us. I don't know why some people live in poverty and why some in the seat of wealth. I don't know why. But I also have let go of the compulsion to understand it. What I do know is that even in our darkest hours, God creates a way forward.

I'll share with you a personal example. Several years ago I was feeling called to enter seminary. My pastor at the time was really encouraging and frankly really annoying in insisting I explore it. However, at the time, I was a single parent supporting two young teens and there was no way I could just quit my job for something as ludicrous as going back to school full time. But I did my due diligence. I stepped forward in the darkness that was exploring an option that seemed pointless. And what I did I learn? That I was right, there was no way I could ever quite my job. Then, I had two coffee dates the week I decided against seminary. The first was with Mark and Jill, the two admissions officers guiding me through the process who seemed to think that blowing off my responsibilities was completely legitimate. I met them and explained that while I thought seminary might be in my future someday that day was not now. I ended with a very sarcastic "But who knows, maybe I'll lose my job – then I'll go." Two days later on a Friday, I met with my pastor to whom I explained the same reasoning including ending with my sarcastic "But who knows, maybe I will lose my job." And then a curious thing happened when I went into work the Monday after that Friday. – I lost my job.

Now the reason I share this story might be different than you expect. My take away from this experience isn't simply that my Magic Vending Machine God

showed up and parted the red seas of my dead-end job existence to bring me to the promised land of Western Seminary. I tell you this to let you know that the experience of losing my job as a single parent was horrible. I didn't know how I would pay my bills. My kids didn't understand why I didn't just go get another regular job like a normal mom. In fact, they still wonder this. I was stressed beyond stressed. Yes, I had faith and belief that God would sustain me, but like Jairus I also was filled with fear.

But. I knew this was God's leading. I knew God was going before me to create a path even before I knew I was even on a new path. I knew in my gut that God was up to something and I knew that if God was already leading the way before even knowing I needed God to lead the way, I could trust that the next step would be ok, even if it felt like chaos. I knew God was with me and had me because God's spirit had given me the gift of faith. I was able to trust my belief more than I trusted my fear.

Suffering affects all of us. And in the woman whom Jesus calls daughter and in Jairus we do see that even with their miraculous healings aside, God's spirit is with them - sustaining them, giving them grace that might even look like patience in dire circumstances. God goes before them to hold the light at the end of a very dark tunnel.

I want to end today with a section from our Old Testament reading from Lamentations; a scripture passage that has meant so much to me in the dark times, as I bet it has for many of you. "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. The LORD is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in God." These truths are given to us, because our feelings will fail. Life will fail. We will fail. But God's love and faithfulness, goes before us, endures with us, and catches us from behind. Because of this, we have faith even as we battle the fear.