

## “Reaching Out”

Mark 5:21-43 (see page 7 & 8 for the parallel gospels version of the text)  
June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2009 Nativity United Church of Christ, Philip Siddons

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**B**y the time the weekend rolls around, we need a break from always being “on.” You know, our constant productivity and focus on what we are trying to finish. Our incessant mindfulness of what’s next on our to do list.

By late Friday, this energy drain of our work, or perhaps looking for work if we are in an employment transition, leaves us feeling like we are washed up on the beach. We are wishing we were at the beach **but** the couch in front of the television and some outsourced fast food is what seems needed for the little remaining psychic turf that is at the edge of the weekend.

Which is why I like to throw in a Netflix movie on Friday night, put my feet up and be entertained. Let someone else in the entertainment industry tell someone’s story of adventure, romance or profound social change toward justice. Give me some story of ordinary people acquiring supernatural power to overcome impossible odds and achieve some stunning victory. Perhaps triumph over evil or crawling out of abject poverty to spectacular wealth. Maybe emergence out of acute loneliness and oppression to overwhelming romance and finally, justice and fairness for everyone. Bring on Friday night.

But a few Friday nights ago, we watched a movie called “Frozen River.” Actress Melissa Leo played a single mother, head of household with a 14 and a 7 year old boys, struggling to make ends meet in their trailer in upstate NY.

The movie opens with her character, Ray, sitting out in her snow-covered front yard, outside her trailer, amidst the rusting junk. She is smoking and shivering because she is wearing a chenille bathrobe, out in the winter cold, and her face is blotchy because she is crying. She can’t get her boss to move her to full time at the variety store and the Rent-To-Own people are on their way to repossess their TV. She’s also about to lose her deposit on a new trailer. Her life is a littered mess of bad decisions and broken relationships. Out of desperation, she turns to join a few others who smuggle illegal aliens.

They live on the edge of the US northern border and a Mohawk tribal land – just outside the border security jurisdiction. She and her fragmented family are not bad people, they’re just living on the edge. They’re dealing with ruthless and violent smugglers but they are desperate.

This is not a ‘date flick.’ You don’t go out to dinner and take in a movie like this. It is unsettling because you *never* feel as if they’re going to make it and you have a sickening feeling in the pit of your stomach all the way through it. ‘Why would anyone watch a movie like this?’ you’re probably asking.

But you do and you see that beneath the surface of the story are real people who are trying their best. Their humanness shines through their despair and dysfunctional lives. And for some reason, you identify with them.

Good script writing. Excellent acting. Not a blockbuster movie but you are moved. You feel for them and their plight. This sort of thing – the poverty and the despair – it happens. It happens to people we know. Sometimes it happens to us.

**I**n a way, we come into church on Sunday mornings kind of like we come into our weekends. Usually, in church, we don’t have to put out. We can just sit back in our pew and have the people up front telling us the stories. Someone else is working on the lessons, the connections, the illustrations and the music. Then we go.

We ought to have a big stuffed vibrating lounge chair for each of us. We should be able to come in here and sit back, put up our feet and relax. We’d probably take in more money in the offerings if each of us had our own easy chair to relax. (*I can see that the Stewardship committee has just run out to the narthex to discuss this great idea.*)<sup>1</sup>

We ought to have remote controls we can press, surfing to different music, or speakers. *Hum, I think*

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously I’m being facetious.

*we've had enough about sin. Didn't do too much of that this week. I've been working so hard I didn't even have time to think of some sin I want to do.*

Instead, how about a talk on the virtues of workaholics. How about a movie running (to keep my attention) – maybe a car chase that ends up in a fiery explosion of the bad guys (which, of course, would symbolize the triumph of good over evil. Now that would be a cool sermon.

Then the music. If we don't want to stand up for a hymn, we should be able to push a fast-forward button and stay seated. Gosh am I lazy on the weekend.

Let's switch this. (*Singing*) A-ma-zing, may, may, ma, may-zing, da da da da da. Why can't we sing "Amazing Grace" to the tune of Lola? Na, . . . that idea has a few kinks in it.

**A**nd yet, no matter how preoccupied we may be with ourselves on Sunday morning, we have come, doing the best we can, and sometimes we are surprised. All of a sudden, in the midst of a story about someone's plight in a sermon illustration, we get a lump in our throat.

There are some hymns and songs the choir sings that trigger deep emotions in me. As soon as they start, I am so moved that I simply stop singing and I just stay quiet until it is over. Some hymns with their melodies and lyrics trigger moments of inspiration in me – images of lofty beauty and senses of loss. It comes upon us and surprises us. We are surprised by our neediness.

In a way, we've all gathered for all of our good and complex reasons to hang out where God is said to be. We come feeling vulnerable and very human. We are here because in some ways, this is our best take on pursuing God's presence.

In a way, we are all living on the edge of things. Economic or perhaps relationship uncertainty. We do this life-long denial thing – living as if there is no end to this life we've carved out for ourselves. We usually keep ourselves occupied as we walk on this not very long balance beam that stretches between life and death. But every day, the newspaper headlines and our neighbors' stories remind us that there is not a very thick tumbling mat to catch us when we fall off this balance beam. Some of us live in the blessedness of

loving relationships but there still may be some rusted relics of our not-so-blessed relationships – heaped up and abandoned but still within sight in our psychic yard.

There are times when we'd like to be smuggled to some other place and start over again, but for some vague reason, we don't know how to get the proper documentation for citizenship in this unknown new land. We are good people but desperation is part of the human condition and maybe, lately, we're feeling even more mindful that we are so human.

This is why we can suddenly find ourselves caught with some surprising empathy when hearing the story about the synagogue leader whose daughter is dying and the poor woman and her years of hemorrhaging. It's because we, or our loved ones, have spent too many hours in the waiting room of the oncologist – waiting for the biopsy news that will either trigger hope or despair. We're caught empathizing with a young family facing their child's death because by now, we are painfully aware that life is so very short.

You see, we are all living on the edge, near known and unknown transitions in our lives. And it is precisely when we fully face the frailties of our own humanness – that's we know we need the assurance of the Presence of God.

**T**hat's certainly what compelled the synagogue leader and the woman, independently, to approach Jesus. Each came to Jesus in their own way. Blessed are those who know their need for God.

Take the temple leader. He was obviously a self-actuated, assertive, result-oriented kind of guy. The kind of leader who could nimbly size up a situation, see what is most important and then go after what it takes to make it happen.<sup>2</sup>

Jairus, being the President of a local Jewish school and temple,<sup>3</sup> would be similar, in our time, to a head Deacon or Elder who chairs a Methodist church board.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> And a quick look over at the Matthew and Luke columns shows the others had shorter renderings. Jesus had just returned from the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee and had entered a Jewish town. As Mark's verse 21 shows, a crowd gathered around Him, and verse 24 says it was a great crowd.

<sup>3</sup> called a synagogue

<sup>4</sup> Methodist is picked because Presbyterian boards (the Session) are

He was a respected community leader – so well known in that community, that Mark mentioned him by name some thirty years after it happened.

By now, Jesus was widely known to be a powerful miracle worker and prophet. Jairus knew all about Him. As He came to Jesus, visibly distressed and falling to his knees, he dramatically pleaded for the healing of his daughter. His daughter was dying. He and his wife were desperate.

In asking Jesus to place His hands on his daughter, it's clear he believed that Jesus had the power to heal and so he assertively, directly and boldly asked for help. Jairus had **knowledge** of Jesus and His power. He and his wife faced the urgent need to have their daughter saved from death so he **pursued** Jesus.

**W**hat a contrast to the approach of the woman who had suffered for over a decade with a hemorrhage.<sup>5</sup> If we pause, for a moment, we can sense the brilliance behind telling these two stories back-to-back as they represent a wonderful contrast of characters. The woman came to Jesus for healing with anything but an assertive and direct approach.

You already know, from your lifetime of Bible study and Sunday sermons, of the life that woman had experienced. You know, for instance, that in the first century Jewish culture, women were considered objects – owned by men and they were never to approach a man in public for any reason. You already know that the priesthood had created a rigorous religious classification scheme defining everything by their “holiness code.” Anything the least bit different was ruled as “unholy” and that list included many foods, animals, people and people’s ailments.

This woman, with a chronic bleeding problem, may also have been a hemophiliac. Through no choice of her own, she was a social outcast. She was undoubtedly anemic, subject to infections, and was probably dying of complications resulting from her inability to fight off disease. Mark even added the detail that she had lost all her money and her condition had

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moderated by clergy.

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting that Luke (in tradition, thought to be a physician) softens Mark’s rendering of the woman’s suffering from apparently poor physician attempts to heal her. (Luke 8:43)

been made worse by incompetent doctors.

The woman’s medical problems had also caused her to be ostracized by her society. She had fallen between the cracks with no public-assistance or Medicaid. There were no support groups available for her tragic life. Today, she would be equivalent to someone who is dying on one of the back wards of Buffalo General Hospital with no health insurance and no money to consult with a medical specialist (who would have competently and aggressively treated her if she had come from the ranks of the well-heeled from the suburbs).

When she approached Jesus, she didn’t say a word. She didn’t write a note, discretely asking someone to pass it to Him. She crept up from behind – from the anonymity of the crowd that was following Him to Jairus’ home. To make matters worse, she got caught – right there in front of the whole crowd. The famous Healer, (Whom everyone in town was following), abruptly stopped to figure out who had touched Him – on His way to see this very important person’s ailing daughter. Everything in her life had gone wrong up to that point and now she was going to be publicly humiliated. Fortunately Jesus compassionately called her “daughter” as she trembled in the sand at His feet.

As timid as she had been, like the Synagogue President, she also had the **knowledge** of Who Jesus was and what He could do. She also had some courage to **pursue** Jesus and to risk breaking through that horrible social and religious judging about “uncleanliness” as she reached out to touch the hem of His cloak. However desperate she was, she took the risk, reached out and sought God’s help.

**W**e can’t help but remember one other person, not included in this passage, who reached out in faith for God’s help.<sup>6</sup> This was the Roman Centurion who sent a messenger to Jesus, asking Him to just command the healing of his servant (without bothering to enter his home). If it would have been today, he would have “texted” or “tweeted” Jesus on a smart phone to ask Him to just “say the word.” He was someone in a position of power and responsibility and was used to delegating tasks to others. He **knew** and

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 7:1-10

**assumed** Jesus to be able to heal and he **pursued** the healing.

This man's faith so "amazed" Jesus, (*imagine Jesus being amazed*), that He turned to the crowd around Him and said, "Wow! I'm telling you, I've never seen faith like this anywhere in all of Israel."<sup>7</sup> The clincher being that not only did this guy have faith enough to ask Him to heal by remote control – He was a Gentile, for goodness sake.

**N**ow at this point, many of us are well into the last half of our lifespan and we've seen or read about almost everything in how people approach God. Besides all the unusual stories – from near-death miraculous healings to groups of fanatics dressed in white robes waiting on the rooftops for the so-called "Second Coming" – it comes down to this. Sooner or later, each of us ask, "Where is God now in my life? Do I dare approach God for healing or resolution?"

I don't know about you, but I've pretty much taken God for granted through much of my life. I had a pleasant enough childhood and youth, having lived with all of the blessings (and little of the disadvantages) of our affluent American culture. Unknowingly, in ignorance, I've benefitted from white and male privilege<sup>8</sup> and have largely careened through my life – without trying to do something to change the social injustices that have given me an unequal portion of goods and services – while most of the rest of the world lives near or below the line of poverty.

But while I've been generally grateful for the blessings I've received through the years, I haven't yet found myself in such dire need as these folks mentioned in the Bible.<sup>9</sup> So most of my life I've approached God

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<sup>7</sup> Obviously "wow!" is a modern transliteration of that 1<sup>st</sup> century conversation since the Greek didn't seem to have a word for "wow"

<sup>8</sup> Meaning that many of us white males have been blind, for some years, to the sexism that excludes and oppresses women and the racism that excludes and oppresses people of color, somehow granting more power and privileges to males than females and to Caucasians than to people of color.

<sup>9</sup> But as soon as that is said, there has got to be several hundred guardian angels raising their celestial eyebrows and tapping their foot in frustration because they have found themselves banged up and bruised and left in my wake, all the times they've saved me from one peril or another.

with more of a *casual* sense of tossing my requests to God. Through the years, my attitude would be, "*Say God, if You get a chance, would Ya take a look at this relationship (or circumstance) I'm facing and lend a hand? I'd like for it to work out a little better than the way it's going right now.*"

Of course, when you and I have faced some emotional or mentally *traumatic* situations, we've been anything but casual. "Blessed are those who know they need God – *theirs* is the kingdom," Jesus put it. But you know from your experiences and those of your friends and relatives, each one of us approaches God in our own way.

Some of us, like the woman, are timid. We don't think too much of ourselves and the importance of our life and situation somehow doesn't seem to compare to some well-known politician, movie star or famous national leader. So we are generally resigned to whatever our plight might be – we don't even bother asking God to help us. Perhaps we feel we're not worth God's time so why ask?

Others of us are more assertive. "*God, get me out of this and I mean now! This isn't right It isn't fair. Good people are suffering and Ya' gotta' do something and I mean it!*"

And then there's the bargaining. Have you ever asked God for something and offered to sweeten the deal by promising to do something (*that you should be doing anyway*) *if* God will do what you want? You know, like promising to go to church or vowing to stop doing some other unhealthy behavior *if* God will fix this or that?

Then there is the hodgepodge of mixed motives we have behind our asking God for things. Although God knows our hearts and our occasionally stupid motives of selfishness, amazingly, God works with us anyway. The most impressive thing about what Jesus has shown us about God, is that God isn't (at all) fooled by us. God knows our minds and hearts and sees the best and the worst of us coming a mile away – and yet God is crazy about us anyway.

No matter how assertively or passively; . . . no matter how knowledgeably or simple-mindedly we come to God, . . . God doesn't change.

Neither is Christianity a managed-faith-care

provider. God doesn't treat us according to the formulary or the rulebook. We are loved as deeply and as compassionately as we love our own children and grandchildren.

Of course you and I have been approaching God with pretty much all the blinders we were given by other fearful Christians in our youth. Most of us have been hearing this phantom voice that has been whispering to us, all our lives, about 'probably not being good enough to deserve God's love.'<sup>10</sup> The words to the old hymns have done a job on our not having a healthy sense of our worth in God's eyes. We have to name the toxicity before we can let it go and walk away from it, . . . if for no other reason than to protect others from it. I mean, all those years of hearing about a supposedly capricious, all-powerful Creator Who condemns all of humanity to eternal hellfire for sin, . . . only to renege because Someone, on our unworthy behalf, took on the torture and punishment that we horrible torture-worthy beings deserve. Many of us have been dragging around this long sack over our shoulder, containing all the things we've done wrong – and all the things we've never accomplished in our lives – all the things we are not.

**W**ell here's the shocker. It doesn't matter how we approach to God. God already knows our need, whether we are too timid to state it or we are too preoccupied to even remember God is beside us. No matter what our spiritual condition, God already knows what is haunting us and what is absolutely shredding our spirits.

Paul put it this way, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for when we don't even know how to pray as we ought, the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And God, Who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for us according to the will of God."<sup>11</sup>

And no way is God so capricious and vein that if

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<sup>10</sup> Namely, John Calvin's famous anagram TULIP: Total Depravity (also known as Total Inability and Original Sin); Unconditional Election; Limited Atonement (also known as Particular Atonement); Irresistible Grace; Perseverance of the Saints (also known as Once Saved Always Saved)

<sup>11</sup> Romans 8:26-27 (NRSV version)

we don't formally ask for help, God just won't help us. In fact, humanity *didn't* ask but God sent Jesus into our presence, anyway, to help us out – to give us direction and healing – at an ominous cost. Look Who was *already* within arm's reach, or within walking distance or within range of messenger service, when those three individuals asked for help.

So one understanding that we can come to is that maybe it isn't as important *how* we approach God as it is that we do so – mindful that God is right beside us. Perhaps all we need to do is have the **faith** and the **knowledge** that the One, (Who made and loves us), is already beside us. We only need the **knowledge** and the **trust**, that right when we *feel* that all is lost and that loneliness and despair is our lot in life – we can **refocus on God's actual presence** in our life and quietly **turn** to God for help.

So it doesn't depend just on you – because by now, you already know it's been out of your control for a long time.

It doesn't depend just on the people you presently see in your life – because by now, you know they haven't been able to affect a change by this point – yet some dear ones have soothed our souls, enabling us to keep on.

Instead, it depends on God and God is enough. Have hope in what you already know about God. "Trust in the Lord and do not rely simply on what you know."<sup>12</sup> Your life and experiences are not meaningless. God cares and *will* act.

So after you've done all you can, . . . wait. Live mindfully **in the moment** and don't get caught up (and tied up in knots) **in the future of "what-ifs."** Live purposefully in the present and don't get trapped in **the past of "what should have been."**

You've already sent out your messengers. You may feel you're left behind by the crowd but God is here, now. It's time to reach out but it really isn't that much of a reach. ■

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<sup>12</sup> See Proverbs 3: 5 & 6

## Jairus' Daughter and the Woman with a Hemorrhage

Mark (written in the 60s) <b>Mark 5:21-43</b>	Matthew (written in the 70s) <b>Matthew 9:18-26</b>	Luke (written in the 80s) <b>Luke 8:40-56</b>
<p><sup>21</sup> And when Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was beside the sea. <sup>22</sup> Then came one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name; and seeing him, he fell at his feet, <sup>23</sup> and besought him, saying, “My little daughter <b>is at the point of death</b>. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live” <sup>24</sup> And he went with him. And a great crowd followed him and thronged about him.</p> <p><sup>25</sup> And there was a woman who had had a flow of blood for twelve years, <sup>26</sup> and who had <b>suffered much under many physicians</b>, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. <sup>27</sup> She had heard the reports about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. <sup>28</sup> For she said, “If I touch even his garments, I shall be made well.”</p> <p><sup>29</sup> And immediately the hemorrhage ceased; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. <sup>30</sup> And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone forth from him, immediately turned about in the crowd, and said, “Who touched my garments?” <sup>31</sup> And his disciples said to him ““You see the crowd pressing around you and yet you say, ‘Who touched me?’”” <sup>32</sup> And he looked around to see who had done it. <sup>33</sup> But the woman, knowing what had been done to her, came in fear and trembling and fell down before him and told him the whole truth.</p>	<p><sup>18</sup> While he was thus speaking to them, behind a ruler came in and knelt before him, saying , <b>“My daughter has just died;</b> but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” <sup>19</sup> And Jesus rose and followed him, with his disciples.</p> <p><sup>20</sup> And behind a woman who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years</p> <p>came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment; <sup>21</sup> for she said to herself, “If I only touch his garment, I shall be made well.”</p>	<p><sup>40</sup> Now when Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed him, for they were all waiting for him. <sup>41</sup> And there came a man named Jairus, who was a ruler of the synagogue; and falling at Jesus’ feet he besought him to come to his house, <sup>42</sup> for he had an only daughter, about twelve years of age, and <b>she was dying</b>. As he went, the people pressed around him.</p> <p><sup>43</sup> And a woman who had had a flow of blood for <b>twelve years and</b> could not be healed by anyone.</p> <p><sup>44</sup> came up behind him, and touched the fringe of his garment; and immediately her flow of blood ceased.</p> <p><sup>45</sup> And Jesus said, “Who was it that touched me?” When all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the multitudes surround you and press upon you!”</p> <p><sup>46</sup> But Jesus said, “Someone touched me for I perceive that power has gone forth from me.”</p> <p><sup>47</sup> And when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling and falling down before him declared in the presence of all the</p>

Mark (written in the 60s) <b>Mark 5:21-43</b>	Matthew (written in the 70s) <b>Matthew 9:18-26</b>	Luke (written in the 80s) <b>Luke 8:40-56</b>
<p><sup>34</sup> And he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”</p> <p><sup>35</sup> While he was still speaking, there came from the ruler’s house some who said “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?” <sup>36</sup> But ignoring what they said, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe.” <sup>37</sup> And he allowed no one to follow him except Peter and James and John the brother of James.</p> <p><sup>38</sup> When they came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, he saw <b>a tumult and people</b> weeping and wailing loudly. <sup>39</sup> And when he had entered he said to them, “Why do you make a tumult and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.” <sup>40</sup> And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside and took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was.</p> <p><sup>41</sup> Taking her by the hand he said to her, “Talitha cumi” which means “Little girl, I say to you arise.”</p> <p><sup>42</sup> And immediately the girl got up and walked (she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement. <sup>43</sup> <b>And he strictly charged them that no one should know this</b> and told them to give her something to eat.</p>	<p><sup>22</sup> Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And instantly the woman was made well.</p> <p><sup>23</sup> And when Jesus came to the ruler’s house, <b>and saw the flute players, and the crowd making a tumult,</b> <sup>24</sup> he said, “Depart; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. <sup>25</sup> But when the crowd had been put outside,</p> <p>he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose.</p> <p><sup>26</sup> And the report of this went through all that district.</p>	<p>people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed.</p> <p><sup>48</sup> And he said to her, “Daughter your faith has made you well; go in peace.”</p> <p><sup>49</sup> While he was still speaking, a man from the ruler’s house came and said “Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the Teacher anymore.” <sup>50</sup> But Jesus, on hearing this, answered him, “Do not fear, only believe and she shall be well.”</p> <p><sup>51</sup> And when he came to the house, he permitted no one to enter with him, except Peter and John and James and the father and mother of the child.</p> <p><sup>52</sup> <b>And all were weeping and bewailing her;</b> 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.</p> <p><sup>54</sup> But taking her by the hand he called, saying “Child, arise.” <sup>55</sup> <b>And her spirit returned</b> and she got up at once; and he directed that something should be given her to eat. <sup>56</sup> And her parents were amazed <b>but he charged them to tell no one what had happened.</b></p>