

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

Taking the Fork in the Road

Mark 5:21-43

Suppose we were making a movie based on these stories. We might start out with a flashback. We would portray a little girl playing with a doll at home, holding it, pretending it was a baby, feeding it, rocking it putting it to sleep. How would we picture her? With long dark curls, perhaps? Or would she have straight hair? Not much doubt about her having dark eyes and a tanned face. After all she was Jewish and lived in the Middle Eastern climate. There would be a few scenes showing her with her parents, her mother washing her face, her father holding her on his lap, reading a story to her at bed time. Judging from the father's plea to Jesus, those would have been happy scenes from a happy childhood. Clearly her father loved her dearly. No doubt her mother did too.

Note that during the flashback to the little girl's childhood we don't know for sure which of the two female characters we were seeing. It could have been either one. Both could have had similar childhoods. If the little girl in the opening scene of the movie were the little girl who died at about 12 years of age, then we would follow her growth from a toddler. We would watch her as she ran through the streets, picked flowers along the pathway, danced in the breeze with other children her age. Being the daughter of the leader of the Synagogue might she have learned to read the Torah? How proud her parents must have been. A twelve year old bright, energetic daughter. At thirteen she would be considered a woman.

Or maybe the flashback portrayed the woman with the hemorrhage. If so we would follow her into adulthood. Perhaps we would celebrate her wedding, watching as she joyfully danced with her new husband. Then we might see her in childbirth, perhaps nursing her own little one as she had pretended as a little girl long ago. If so, we might have in mind her smile as she rejoiced in that new life and in her happiness. Or maybe we'd learn that she was never married. And we'd follow her through the difficult challenges that faced an unmarried woman in those days. Either way we can picture both little girls, growing up in a household, hopefully one full of love.

Once they had run freely through the streets and fields, laughing and playing with other children. But not now. Something had gone horribly wrong. When we meet up with them in this story, that joy of childhood contrasts sharply with a tragic present. We see a young girl, twelve short years old, lying on her death bed. And we see an older woman broken down by a debilitating condition she had suffered for twelve long years! "She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had;" Mark says, "and she was no better, but rather grew worse." Twelve years of traveling to doctor after doctor, to faith healer after faith healer, only to get worse and worse. Twelve all too brief years on the one hand. Twelve all too long years on the other. And they all led up to this moment, when Jesus was just getting off the boat on the Jewish side of the lake of Galilee.

Remember that Jesus was largely unknown to this point. Oh, we've listened to him preach in the synagogue and watched as he healed the sick. But that was nothing like saving a little girl from death. Was it the same synagogue Jairus led? If so, then that little girl's father and Jesus had met before. Remember? Jesus preached in the synagogue and a madman challenged him. Jesus exorcised the demon and told the man to be quiet. According to the other gospels, the leader of the synagogue criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. Can't help but wonder if that leader were Jairus, the little girl's father.

After that we followed Jesus to the other side of the lake, where the Gentiles lived. On that lake crossing he stilled the storm that threatened to sink the boat the disciples were in. As if that weren't shocking enough, he healed a mad man who lived in the cemetery. He ordered the demons out of the man and into a herd of

swine. The pigs then ran into the lake and drowned. That so shook up the people that they asked Jesus to leave. So he got into the boat and returned to the Jewish side of the lake where we find him today. When he got off the boat a crowd gathered to hear him preach and perhaps to be healed themselves.

That's when the ruler of the synagogue approached him, fell at his feet actually, a worshipful sign if there ever was one. And Jesus went with him. But before he could get to the man's house, the other woman in the story interrupted him, reached out and touched him, and she was healed. Healed! Twelve years of anguish overturned. A life of pain and suffering ended. A new life of joyous health begun. All from a touch. She reasoned, innocently enough, that all she needed to do was touch his clothing. Which is what she did. Never figured that she'd have to answer for her actions, have to look him in the eye and actually talk to him. But that's what came next. He stopped, interrupted his urgent journey, to find out who had touched him. The disciples were incredulous. Here they are being jostled around by the crowd and Jesus wants to know who touched him!

Who is this man who stills storms with a word, who senses when healing power has gone out of him? Who is this man who isn't concerned when the servants report that the little girl has died? Who is this man who turns to the distraught father and says, "Do not fear, only believe." Who is this man who stares into the crowd until the frightened, but transformed woman approaches, falls at his feet and acknowledges that she is the one who touched him. And who is he to say simply, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

Yogi Berra, notable for his interesting use of the English language as well as his baseball abilities, once said, "When you come to the fork in the road, take it." Well today's story is a portrait of two people taking the fork in the road. Both had a decision to make. And both acted on their decision. The woman had to decide whether to come forward and speak to Jesus or not. She could have faded into the crowd, you know. She could have walked away. But then she would not have known who it was that healed her. It was not magic, not the simple touching of a robe, but the power of God at work in her. By faith she was made whole.

The ruler of the synagogue had to decide if his official position was more important than his daughter's life. We don't know of course whether he was at risk of losing his position or not, but we do know that he came to Jesus because there was nowhere else to turn. His daughter was dying. No doctor could help her. She was, as they say, in extremis, beyond human help. But her father knew of one who could help, one who healed with God's healing power, one who spoke of God's love as no other had spoken. And then he had to decide to continue trusting Jesus even though everybody else told him his daughter was dead.

After telling the woman her faith had healed her, Jesus continued on the way with Jairus. No doubt the ruler of the synagogue wondered again just who this man was unfazed as he was by all the commotion. The child is only sleeping, he said. Everybody laughed at him. Everybody but the little girl's parents, that is. Those words, "Do not fear, only believe," surely echoed in their ears. Then Jesus took them into the room, took the little girl by the hand and raised her up. Seeing that everybody was stunned by this development, Jesus told them to give her something to eat; and he went on his way.

That of course means that you and I have come to a fork in the road. We too are faced with a decision: take it or leave it. These "are not stories about how to get God to do what we want, which is just another way of trying to stay in control. Instead, they are stories about who God is, and how God acts, and what God is like. Mark wrote them down for one reason and one reason alone: "This is no ordinary man," he tells us every way he knows how. "This man is the son of God. Believe it."¹

¹ Reflection and Focus Questions by Kate Huey.
<http://i.ucc.org/StretchYourMind/OpeningtheBible/WeeklySeeds/tabid/81/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/206/Healing-Powers-Jun-2228.aspx>