

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Mark 5:21-43

SERMON TITLE: Desperate for Life

What would you do to save the life of your dying child? There was a man named Jairus whose daughter was dying. And he was desperate to save his daughter's life. So what did he do? This distinguished ruler of the synagogue—this man of high standing—sought out an itinerant rabbi from Nazareth named Jesus and when he found him, he fell at his feet and begged him, over and over again: *My little girl is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.*

Would his colleagues in the religious establishment have approved? Probably not. Were people shocked? Some surely were. But Jairus was desperate—he was desperate to save his daughter's life—so he turned to Jesus. What would you do to save the life of your dying child? How far would you go?

What would you do to save your own life? Some of you may remember the comedian Andy Kaufman, the guy who played Latka Gravas on the television show, *Taxi*. Well, in 1983, Kaufman was diagnosed with incurable lung cancer. He was expected to live less than three months.

Kaufman tried chemotherapy but he was so desperate to find a cure for his disease that he traveled to the Philippines in 1984 to be treated by a so-called “psychic surgeon.” For six weeks, Kaufman received two-a-day treatments that consisted of the healer appearing to plunge his hands into Kaufmann's body to remove the malignant tumors. It was all a fake. Andy Kaufman died on May 16, 1984.¹ What would you do to save your own life? How far would you go?

As Jesus went with Jairus, a large crowd followed them. People were pressing in on Jesus from every side. In the crowd was a woman desperate to save her own life. She had been

¹ “The Last Days of Andy Kaufman,” *Lost in the Funhouse*, <http://andykaufman.jvlnet.com/final.htm> (accessed June 27, 2003).

hemorrhaging for 12 years. She had tried everything to be healed—she had spent everything that she had—but nothing worked. Her condition was getting worse.

To add insult to injury, this woman’s bleeding made her ritually unclean. In other words, in the eyes of her culture, she was spiritually dead—she was contaminated—she was polluted. She could touch no one. She could be touched by no one—not even her family. Socially speaking--compared to Jairus—this woman was a nobody. We don’t even know her name.

But there she was in a place where she wasn’t supposed to be—in a crowd—putting others at risk of being contaminated by her uncleanness. This woman was desperate to save her life. What would you do to save your life?

Why was she there? She had heard about Jesus and she believed that if she could only touch his cloak, she would be made well. So this woman who was to touch no one—touched Jesus—and immediately the bleeding stopped.

So what would Jesus do? He was on his way to save the life of a little girl whose father was a prominent member of the community—a leader of the synagogue. Would Jesus stop and acknowledge what had just happened to this nobody in the crowd? Would he stop for a nobody and risk the death of this prominent man’s daughter? What would he do?

Jesus stopped. He turned to the crowd and said, *Who touched my clothes?* He had felt the power of God leave him. The disciples didn’t want to bother: *There are too many people around. You’ll never know who touched you.* But Jesus wanted to know who had touched him, so he looked over the crowd. The woman fell down before him trembling and in fear. She told him the whole truth.

And what did Jesus do? Jesus said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

Can you imagine that: Jesus called this woman—this nobody--***Daughter***. Jairus had a daughter that Jairus obviously loved. Now, this outcast woman whose name is not even known—is like a daughter to Jesus—a beloved member of his own family. And in an instant—years of social and religious isolation or overcome—and this woman is blessed not just with physical healing, but with the healing of her soul. Now there can be peace for her.

And all of this is because of her faith—her tenacious, pushy, persistent faith—her faith in the power of Jesus—her faith born of desperation.

To me, this story within a story is an illustration of how things work in God's kingdom: The last become first. In other words, the needs of an ill and outcast woman who is already considered dead by her community, are worth addressing even before the needs of a dying little girl who happens to be the daughter of a prominent religious leader. In the kingdom of God, the last become first—and we had best pay attention.

But the story's not over yet. While Jesus was dealing with the woman, word came that Jairus' daughter had died. The conclusion is that Jesus is no longer needed. Jesus may have the power to heal, but surely there's nothing he can do to bring a dead little girl back to life. Jesus said to Jairus: ***Do not fear, only believe.***

When Jesus arrived at the house, what did he find? Mourners weeping and wailing. Now in the case of the hemorrhaging woman, no one had cared about her at all—they had already written her off. But for Jairus' daughter, there were mourners aplenty. The mourners laughed when Jesus talked about the girl being asleep instead of dead. Jesus ushered the mourners out. He then took his three disciples and the girl's parents into see the child. Jesus touched her, spoke to her in Aramaic, ***Talitha cum, Little girl, get up!*** And this 12 year old little girl got up,

walked around and everyone was amazed. Jesus told them to keep quiet about all of this and to give the little girl something to eat.

So what would you do to save the life of your dying child? What would you do to save your own life?

Well, the good news is that desperation doesn't have to end in despair. The stories point us to Jesus. The stories invite us to faith. And sometimes, miraculous things happen.

Let me tell you about Ajay Gohill. Ajay was born in Kenya and went to England in 1971. He had been raised a Hindu and worked in his family business as a newsagent. At the age of twenty-one, he contracted a chronic skin disease called **erythrodermic psoriasis** (eh-REETH-ro-der-mik). His weight dropped from 161 to 105 pounds. In his desperation to be healed, he traveled all over the world seeking a cure. He spent eighty percent of his earnings in the process. He took strong drugs that affected his liver. Eventually, he had to give up his job. The disease was all over his body from head to toe. He was so horrible to look at that he could not go swimming or even wear a T-shirt. He lost all his friends. His wife and son left him. On August 20, 1987, he was in a wheelchair in the Elizabeth Ward of St. Thomas's Hospital. He spent over seven weeks in the hospital receiving various kinds of treatments. On October 14, he was lying in his bed wanting only to die. He cried out, "God, if you are watching, let me die—I am sorry if I have done something wrong." He said that as he prayed he "felt a presence." He looked in his locker and pulled out a *Good News Bible*. He opened it at random and read Psalm 38 which includes these words:

My sores stink and rot. I am bowed down, I am crushed; I mourn all day long... I am worn out and utterly crushed; my heart is troubled, and I groan with pain... Do not abandon me, O Lord; do not stay away, my God! Help me now, O Lord my Savior!

Each and every verse seemed relevant to Gohill. He prayed for God to heal him and he then fell into a deep sleep. When he awoke the next morning everything looked new. He went to the bathroom and relaxed in a bath. As he looked at the bathwater, he saw his skin had lifted off and was floating in the bath. He called the nurses in and told them that God was healing him. All his skin was new like a baby's. He had been totally healed. Since then he has been reunited with his son. He says that the inner healing that taken place in his life is even greater than the physical healing. He says, "Every day I live for Jesus."²

Sometimes miraculous things happen, but sometimes not. The scriptures acknowledge this. For every miracle story, there's a story of someone who wasn't healed no matter how desperate they were for life, or how much faith they had. Ultimately, we're not in control. Our lives are in God's hands. So what are we to do? ***Do not fear, only believe.*** And leave the rest up to God.

² Nicky Gumbel, *Question of Life: A Practical Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Ministry Resources 1996), 209-211.