



DEEPER FAITH

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
March 22nd, 2009*

Our son Addison has joined the swim team that practices over at the Federal Way Community Center. The other day, I had to ask his coach a question, so I went over to where he was sitting and interrupted a conversation he was having with a mom. I felt a little bad about that, so I apologized and went back over to my spot on the bleachers.

A few minutes later, this mom comes walking my direction, and I thought, “uh oh. She’s not pleased.” But she stops in front of me, she looks at me kind of funny, and she says, “Are you... Jeff Peabody?”

I said “Yesss...” and then I gave her the same funny look right back, as my mind was whirling and whirling trying to place her. Then a little light came on, and I said, “Debbie?” It turned out to be Debbie White who I went to kindergarten with at South Bay Elementary down in Lacey more than a lot of years ago. She used to drive me crazy by calling me Jeffy. It was so strange to see her here all this time later in a completely different context. It was fun to catch up and see where our paths had gone over the past couple decades. I probably had a longer conversation with her that day than I ever did back in school, and I learned about her life in a whole different way than I could have back in Mrs. Gallagher’s class.

Sometimes you can get to know people better outside of the normal context. That’s true of the people we’ll be talking about today. Matthew has been introducing us to all these individuals who have been impacted by an encounter with Jesus. And next up in the sequence are two more people Christ changed forever. We get to know them one way in Matthew, But for our purposes this morning, we can get to know them a little better if we look at them not in that context but by turning over to the book of Mark. Because Mark expands their story that helps us see some things in new ways. So the characters are still Matthew’s, but the context will be Mark.

Mark 5:21-43

When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." So Jesus went with him.

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"

"You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'"

But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

While Jesus was still speaking, some men came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher any more?"

Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, "Don't be afraid; just believe."

He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him.

After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum!" (which means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!"). Immediately the girl stood up and walked around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

In Japan this week, they unveiled a new robot with the face of a Japanese girl. The face is pretty lifelike. It can make different expressions of surprise and anger. It will talk and walk and even blink. When you first see that face, you go, "Wow! That's unbelievable! What an incredible breakthrough!"

But then you pull back and get a bigger picture. You start to see the whole robot and you see it in action. And you realize the technology still has a way to go. Her hands don't bend. Her knees don't unbend. In the demonstration, she kept giving a look of surprise when the controllers were asking for anger or happiness.

Get this: The scientists behind it are trying to develop the technology to the point where these robots can be caregivers for the elderly and the sick. How scared would you be to move into that nursing home?

As you look at the stories interwoven in our text this morning, the story of Jairus and the story of the sick woman, at first glance it looks like they have absolutely amazing faith. Jairus thinks Jesus can save his dying daughter. The sick woman thinks just a touch of Jesus' robe is all she needs. That sounds like an incredible amount of belief.

But as you pull back and look at the big picture, you notice different things about their faith – things that aren't quite complete. As events unfold, what initially seemed so impressive gets exposed as still needing significant work.

The great thing is that unlike our little robot friend, the faith of Jairus and this woman goes back to the lab right on the spot. Jesus uses the opportunity to not only answer their prayers, but also greatly deepen their trust. He stretches their faith to a new capacity, but he does it in such a gentle way that they aren't crushed by it.

Put yourself in the sandals of Jairus that day. His daughter is on her deathbed. Luke tells us it was his only daughter, his little princess. Here Jairus is an important official, and he has no medical resources at his disposal to do anything. There is no doctor that can help and there is no time to find one. The situation is as dire as it can get.

In 1605, the British revolutionary, Guy Fawkes, said, "The desperate disease requires a dangerous remedy." And that's exactly what Jairus goes for – a dangerous remedy. He's one of the religious leaders, that group of people who has been so opposed to what Jesus is doing. But he doesn't even care what his peers are going to say about him asking Jesus to heal her. And he doesn't care what anybody thinks about him groveling and begging. He will do anything – ANYTHING – to save his daughter's life. When Mark tells us he pleaded earnestly, the Greek word there means intensely, or with a lot of repetition. He was beating down the door of heaven for help.

Last year I told the story of when my dad was little and playing outside. My grandpa was digging a hole and was down below ground level so he couldn't see what was above. He threw his shovel up to the surface, clocking my dad in the head. Like all good head injuries, it began to bleed profusely, and when my grandpa saw it, he flew inside with my dad and promptly grabbed a stick of butter and began applying it to the wound. Apparently he was getting confused with what someone had told him worked for burns. We Peabodies have never been clear thinkers in a crisis. Fortunately, we are pretty hard headed stock and my dad recovered just fine.

The point I'm trying to make is that my grandpa didn't have some deep belief that butter could help – he was just a parent in a panic, reaching for anything he could find to help his son. Jairus coming and pleading with Jesus doesn't necessarily show a tremendous amount of faith in Jesus as much as it shows a tremendous amount of desperation. He is

a parent in a panic. He is at his wits' end. He's not primarily motivated by a strong belief in Jesus – he's motivated by intense concern for his daughter.

There's the old saying that there are no atheists in foxholes, meaning when there's great peril, most of us cry out to God for help whether we believed in him before or not.. That doesn't mean we suddenly have great faith – it just means we have a great need.

We have in our heads that faith begins with confidence, but more often than not, it begins when we have lost confidence. Instead of unshakable commitment to God, it starts when our world is shaken to its core, when we are in the place of being completely overwhelmed and needing to look outside ourselves for help. Maybe you're in that spot this morning and it feels more like doubt than true faith.

But that's not a bad place to start. We're in really good company when we begin there. That's how David felt when Saul was trying to kill him and he was hiding out in the cave. He prayed and said,

Psalm 142:5-6

I cry out, GOD, call out:

'You're my last chance, my only hope for life!'

Oh listen, please listen; I've never been this low.

God welcomes our desperation. He's there to catch us when we're at the end of our rope.

If I went to hire a personal trainer to start getting in shape, they're not going to look at me and laugh and say, "I can't work with you! You're totally out of shape. Bulk up a bit, lose the flab and then we'll talk."

That would be ridiculous. Trainers love the challenge of taking someone to a new level of fitness. That's their job. All they need is someone who has the desire to do it.

Or let's say you hire a housecleaner, and every week before they come to your house, you feel this urge to deep clean your house from top to bottom so they don't think you're a messy person.

We do that with God all the time, thinking we've got to have some unidentified greater amount of faith before we go to him with our requests. But it's our requests that he's wanting. The asking itself is part of the way our faith increases. I love how the Message version translates Psalm 34:

Psalm 34:17-18

*Is anyone crying for help? GOD is listening,
ready to rescue you.*

*If your heart is broken, you'll find GOD right there;
if you're kicked in the gut, he'll help you catch your breath.*

When Jairus comes up to Jesus in a panic, Jesus doesn't put him down for that – he responds to it. He gets up immediately to go with him.

Something happens before they get very far. This anonymous woman comes out of nowhere and yanks on the fringe of Christ's robe. Just a small tug in the middle of a packed crowd of people clamoring around the Lord. So slight nobody around him even notices it. But Jesus does. And he stops.

I find this to be one of the most remarkable scenes in the Bible. Right in the middle of this urgent crisis, a life and death situation, Christ brings the whole parade to a halt to help this woman who hadn't even bothered to ask for it. There was nothing life-threatening about her situation. She'd been dealing with it for years. No reason why she couldn't wait a couple more hours until Jesus has finished with Jairus' daughter. And even if she couldn't wait – it appears that she got what she needed before Jesus stopped, so he could have kept going.

But he doesn't, and here's the thing: It is always on Jesus' way to bring healing and hope. When we come to him, we are never a distraction from his main mission. He doesn't see our suffering as being less important than someone else's. Our sense of what is more urgent is not the same as his, because the God who heals the sick also raises the dead. He is not constrained by time the way we are.

If you are thinking that your problems aren't worth bringing to God, that he's too busy managing the affairs of the world, this story is for you. We're right on his way. We are as much a part of his agenda as the next person.

The disciples were somewhat blind to this. When Jesus was wanting to find who touched him, they were saying, "What do you mean? Everyone's touching you." They wanted to keep him on task and moving forward.

Maybe we don't have trouble seeing Jesus stop for our own needs, but we're oblivious to the faces in the crowd wanting a simple touch. We can have plans we want Jesus to stick to, and stopping for people can interfere with our timetable. I want to have some of that sensitivity of Jesus, to be more aware of who is trying to reach him and to feel the freedom in my spirit to not rush toward a plan and miss the people.

As I mentioned, the woman in this story got what she needed before Jesus even turned around. She was healed before he talked to her. So that gets you wondering: Why did he need to stop in the first place? What was Jesus trying to do?

Like Jairus, the woman had some room to grow in her faith. She had some limited ideas about what belief in Jesus looked like. She thought all she needed was to connect with a piece of cloth to be healed. And on one level that was true – it worked. But it wasn't the cloth that healed her – it was Jesus. And she hadn't counted on encountering him directly.

There were two reasons for her misconceptions. She was carrying a great deal of **shame** with her. According to Jewish law, if you were bleeding, you were unclean. You had to separate yourself, and you certainly couldn't be in a crowd like this one. There was a stigma to her condition and she didn't want anyone to know about it. So she was being as secretive as she could about her action to avoid embarrassment.

The second reason she didn't understand faith was that she was thinking of it in terms of **power**. Jesus was nothing more than a means to an end. Just get what you need from him and get out. She hadn't even planned to say thank you!

This, I believe, is why Jesus stopped. Look what he does:

But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

Jesus waits for the woman to step forward. He's asking her for honesty and transparency, and right there in front of everyone, Mark says she told him the whole truth. Bringing her situation into the light removed the cloud of shame, because Jesus didn't condemn her for what she had done. His response restored her dignity and her place in the community. This was beyond physical healing – this was a deep, emotional healing that couldn't have happened had she slipped away.

And to address her mistaking him for nothing more than a power source, Jesus brings her into relationship. He calls her "daughter," tenderly building a personal connection. I don't think it's by accident he calls her that in this context. It's as if to say, "Yes, I'm concerned about this other man's little girl, but here is another daughter. My daughter. I feel every bit as strongly about her getting well as he does about his daughter." And Jesus shows that same earnestness – that intense, repetitive commitment to rescuing us.

Ephesians 2:4-5

*But because of his **great** love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions -- it is by grace you have been saved.*

That word "great" there used to describe God's love for us is the same word used to describe Jairus' pleading with Jesus – intense, repetitive and strong. I just love that! What an awesome picture of how fiercely the Lord cares about us.

Our faith is in a Father – not a force. I can so easily forget this one. I want to get close enough to God to get what I want from him. I can think about prayers I need answered and think about what fringe I need to touch to make it happen. How can I squeeze a response out of God? What special words do I need to say to get some results?

That completely depersonalizes God and turns him into some magic power that is there for us to tap into when we need it. And he won't settle for that. Faith is always about being called into relationship with him, where there is communication and truth telling and gratitude. An impersonal force can't address shame. A physical superpower can't heal more than our physical problems. And Jesus is interested in so much more about us than that.

While all this has been going on, Jairus has been pacing nearby, watching, probably wondering why Jesus is taking so long. The wait had to be agony, because there was no time to spare. And then, finally, when it looks as if they can get moving again, here come the messengers from his house. He can see the news in their faces before they say a thing. It's too late. She's gone.

Desperation turns to devastation. Jairus begins to lose it. And Jesus looks him straight in the eye and says, "Don't go there. Don't let this be about fear. Put all your energy into trusting me in this moment."

Really, Jairus's worst fear has just come true. His daughter died. This was the one thing he had dreaded and now it was like a nightmare had come true. And it brought his tiny, brand new baby faith to a critical juncture: What do you do when your one prayer, your one greatest need, seems to go unanswered? Do you continue believing in God, or do you turn away? This juncture of faith is about **becoming fearless**.

John Donne faced that question back in the 17th century. He was the dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, the largest church in London. During his time there, the bubonic plague struck the city, killing 40,000 people. And while everyone was turning to him for comfort or an explanation, Donne too came down with a debilitating disease similar to typhoid fever.

As he was sick and confined to bed for six weeks, shaky and almost dying, he began to write down his thoughts on suffering and God. He argued and debated with God about why he was experiencing so much pain, why the people around him were experiencing so much pain.

As he was processing things, he found that at the heart of everything for him was fear. He became obsessed with it and looked up every reference to fear in the Bible. And what he discovered was that there is always some circumstance in life that will cause fear. If it wasn't illness, it would be poverty, or grief, or loneliness or failure. And as he realized that the "why" questions were unanswerable, he began to concentrate instead on what his response to fear should be. And he realized his choice was really between fearing God or fearing everything else, between trusting God or trusting nothing.

And so he prayed this prayer: "Give me, O Lord, a fear, of which I may not be afraid." He came to the conclusion that God was good and trustworthy, no matter how circumstances changed from day to day.

I believe Jesus allowed for the delay on the way to the home of Jairus to help free this man from the debilitating fear that had gripped him. He had been consumed with the fear of losing his daughter, and so when he had lost her, what was left? On the far side of it, where would his faith go? Jesus called Jairus to a faith no longer based on panic but simply trust that he would do the best thing for whatever came next.

What fears have gripped you this morning? Fear of the future? Fear of being alone? Fear of bad news? God may not stop that fear from coming true. But he will still be with you in the middle of it and on the far side of it, and he's saying to you, "Don't be afraid. Only believe. There is hope beyond this moment. I am still good. I am still God."

For Jairus, the wait wasn't much longer. Look again at what happened next.

When they came to the home of the synagogue ruler, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him.

After he put them all out, he took the child's father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum!" (which means, "Little girl, I say to you, get up!").

Here we're talking about **Faith Real Estate: Making Room.**

In those days, when somebody died, professional mourners were hired to come in. We quickly learn three things about this crowd. First, they're **premature**. They're all deep into the business of grief, when according to Jesus, it's too soon for that. I find it so surreal that they are crying their eyes out and they still manage to laugh at Jesus. Here Jesus is telling them this great news and they've jumped to the wrong conclusion, so they can't accept what he's saying.

Second, the crowd is **loud**. Mark tells us there was commotion and wailing. Matthew tells us it was a noisy crowd with musicians. There is this din pounding away at your ears so you can barely hear or think.

And the third thing is that the crowd was simply **in the way**. There were too many bodies taking up too much room. What does Jesus do when he arrives and sees all this chaos? He says, "Get out." He clears the room and makes space so he can do his work. Christ wanted to replace the sadness with joy. He wants to lift the despair and offer hope. He wants to drive out the lie that the girl was gone with the truth that she was alive. To do all that, he needed to make some space. So he sent the noisy crowd packing.

We've all got crowded heads and hearts. There are voices that are sending us messages all the time, and they act the same way as this crowd. They'll come on prematurely. Do you ever find that you jump to grief and gloom ahead of schedule? We reach out to God for help, but we live like he doesn't answer prayer. And more often than not, we write off the possibility of the Lord actually changing our situation.

It's like when Peter showed up at the door while everybody was praying for his release from jail. Rhoda's saying, "It's him! It's him!" and the disciples are all saying, "Shh! Can't you see we're talking to God?" There's a disconnect between the request and the response.

Usually, the voices are loud, too, drowning out what God might be saying to us. You know the lies: God can't forgive that. You should just give up. God doesn't care. You'll never change. There's no hope. Those are powerful messages.

And they're in the way. The more we listen to the lies, the less room Christ has in which to work. We can begin clearing some real estate for him by deliberately getting rid of the crowd.

As we identify those messages for what they are, we can begin to stop listening to them. We can fill our minds with the promises of God and the truth about Christ's character. The truth that he is the resurrection and the life. The truth that he is stronger than fear. The truth that he forgives. The truth that he will never abandon us. The truth that he holds all our sorrows and carries our pain. The truth that he loves us intensely and wants a relationship with us.

Some of you are here this morning carrying an incredible load of desperation and devastation this morning. And I wish I had words to ease the burden or help it make sense. Every week I talk to somebody different who is reeling from life and asking why. And as much as I'd like to, I can't honestly answer that question.

I do know this, though: When I run to God with my desperation, he meets me. I can only testify to my own experience, but, when I have begged and begged him to answer, he has faithfully met me time after time – not always with the answer I want, but with his presence. It's down in the depths where I have learned the most about the depths of God. The Bible says God is close to the brokenhearted, and it's when I've been in that place that I have been most aware of how close he really is.

We have a God who knows suffering and our connection to him is centered on the cross where his Son died for us. Where in the universe will you find a god who has made himself more readily available to us in our agony? Despair cannot isolate us from Jesus, because he experienced our despair himself.

When you're in the middle of that darkness though, sometimes it just feels like you're grabbing for a stick of butter or reaching for a fringe. It might feel like you've got no faith at all. And that's okay. Jesus is still stopping for you. He's the one who will walk you to a place of deeper faith. He's calling you to himself. And he's still saying, "Don't be afraid: Just believe."

I always liked the story of when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were about to be thrown in the fiery furnace for not worshipping the king's statue. I loved their words to the king:

Daniel 3:17-18

If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.

That's where I want my faith to be – believing God can do anything for me, and believing that even if he doesn't do it – it doesn't change the facts. He is still the one true God. He is still our Heavenly Father, not a force, and he loves you and he loves me with great intensity.

Give us, o Lord, a fear of which we may not be afraid.