

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
Mark 5: 21-24, 35-43

I grew up in western New York. I grew up working with my hands among people who were predisposed to the trades. In my extended family, whose roots were in farming, hard work was a form of godliness. It was a demonstration of character. The religious traditions that endured over time there in the hills of the finger lakes were the Baptist and Nazarene types. These traditions emphasized piety and discipline and self-control. Sprinkled in was a little bit of Pentecostalism just to keep it exciting to keep folks on their toes. These were traditions that emphasized male leadership, a leadership proven by being in control of one's world and keeping one's family in order and such things.

I mention these things because I have sensed that my upbringing has a fair amount in common with life in Galilee in Jesus' time. This synagogue leader is a respected person in the community. But he is respected not just because of his office. Respect in such communities is earned through character and consistency. While certain institutions may be recognized, it is the demonstration of character that people are most interested in. And such consistent people of character maintain our hope, maintain some sense of order, and the ability to maintain control and demeanor in a disconcerting world.

So it strikes me that this symbol of piety and faith, character and self-control, is undone. "Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.'"

"My little daughter," cries Jairus. "My little daughter!" Jairus is a grown man, a synagogue leader, and is honored and looked up to. A person of his stature always acts in dignity, and he sits in seats of honor and in authority. But now, he is taken to his knees, down in the dust, in distress over his "little daughter." He begs repeatedly, reduced to desperation. It must have caused those around to turn their heads and to take notice. Perhaps observers were moved by his predicament, or maybe they were just uncomfortable by how broken this man appears with his desperate cries, by a grown man with tears in his eyes, an elder of the community taken to his knees.

Now I confess that when I began thinking about this sermon, I had my stories conflated. I was thinking of this man's daughter who had fallen ill, but I had conflated it with the story from Luke 7, of the Centurion whose servant had fallen ill and who sends word through the Jewish elders for Jesus to come to heal his servant. A centurion in the Roman army was in charge of a group of soldiers. Centurion suggests a hundred, though in practice, it may have been closer to 60 or 80. Nonetheless, this is a leader, a person in charge of instilling character and maintaining discipline among young soldiers. A person who too values character as the highest of attributes. Interestingly, since a Centurion is a Roman soldier, Roman soldiers are not often viewed favorably or held in honor in a Jewish community or in the gospel stories. But this man seemed to be something of an adherent or a benefactor of the local synagogue.

So when word comes that this man's servant is seriously ill and near death, the appeal is made as to why this man deserves Jesus' help and favor. "When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, 'He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.'"

In both stories, Jesus responds and goes with in order to heal. Jesus is moved with compassion, and he seems sympathetic to their concern. He seems prone to honor their character and their plea. In both cases, a person of character and authority is reduced to pleas for help and mercy. Though in the Centurion story, it is a plea for Jesus to use his authority in a place where the Centurion's authority has been exhausted. The Centurion commands soldiers, enforces discipline, and is always in control, but his authority and discipline cannot help him. He knows his limits. So he appeals to Jesus's authority. And Jesus here is impressed with his faith because he acknowledges that Jesus does have authority over such things, and he can help, and he can heal.

Jairus, the synagogue leader too comes with a plea for Jesus' help. His desperation comes through more clearly, however. Not only has he reached the limits of his authority or capability, this is not just a servant, not just a friend, or even a family member. "My little daughter," is his cry. To not know how to protect or care for and make things better for your child or your loved one, for your little daughter, it has a way of reducing you, doesn't it?

In both stories, there is a sense that Jesus responds to their character and status. But what comes through in both stories is that what Jesus actually responds to is their humility. The confrontation with limitation, with desperation, with an acknowledgment of a lack of authority, a lack of control. This is confirmed in both

stories because they are paired with another story of someone with no authority, no honorable reputation. In the Jairus story, it is interrupted with the healing of the unclean woman, which is our text for next week. The Luke story is followed by the story of the widow of Nain whose son had died.

Jairus, in that spirit of humility, does not come reading his resume. He comes in humility and desperation and hope, but matters will grow worse. While in route, word comes that it is too late. Your daughter is gone. Don't trouble the teacher, the healer, any longer. For even the healer does not have jurisdiction here. And when Jesus suggests she is curable even still, they laugh, as in scoff. But Jesus comes to the house, and he puts away the crowds and the drama, and he gathers with the family and the few. And he calls her to get up.

Now I gleaned and learned and gained a great deal growing up working with my hands, among those that valued discipline and character and consistency. But what those emphases risk obscuring is that life is beyond our ultimate control. Now I think wise choices and conservative risk-taking mitigates against chaos and difficulty. But in the end, life often brings us to the brink, even as it does for Jairus. In the end, we will reach our limitations, and we will be reminded even as Jairus is, and the Centurion is, that we can only rely on the grace and mercy and authority of our Lord.

And what was deemphasized in my upbringing was vulnerability and honesty about challenges and humility. What our response sang of this morning, echoing 2 Chronicles 7, is the plea for God to heal and help for our land, for our communal and national concerns when they, like our personal lives and families, prove outside of our control and ability to fix. But how this principle gets expressed is that if we get our acts together, if we get the principles right, God will reward us and heal us if we demonstrate discipline and character. When really, the principle expressed is the corporate corollary to Jairus' cry. It is the throwing ourselves on the mercy of our Lord, it is the acknowledging of our limitations, our vulnerability, our need.

In 2 Chronicles, Solomon is dedicating the temple, whose construction he commissioned, an impressive monument of strength, honor, and God's blessing. But God says that what will secure God's help is not just monuments and accolades of strength. It is humility. "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." The temple is the worship site, not where they boast of their prowess and strength, but where they may express their humility, prayers, and repentance.

As the synagogue leader, Jairus demonstrates to his congregation, at a moment when he is reduced to desperation and pain, humility and dependence on the Lord. And the values that survive at the end of the day are not poise and posture, and control, they are humility and kindness. I think of the poem Lynn read. Kindness, like love of neighbor that Jesus consistently lifts up, is born out of humility and that moment when all our discipline and control can't help us, and we throw ourselves on the grace of God.

Shihab Nye writes:

Before you know what kindness really is  
you must lose things,  
feel the future dissolve in a moment  
like salt in a weakened broth.  
What you held in your hand,  
what you counted and carefully saved,  
all this must go so you know  
how desolate the landscape can be  
between the regions of kindness.

This is the irony. Jairus is probably thinking, I have kept my honor and world in order all these years, and this one moment I lose it is what I will be remembered for. When in reality, it is that moment that is most instructive for his congregation, most instructive for those who choose to follow Christ. It is the moment when we let Christ be for us what we cannot be. When we choose to show grace and love and kindness to those who also are undone by life, whether by their own choices and mistakes, or by the happenings of life outside of their control.

Healing comes not because you have the world by the horns, or because you deserve it. It is because you are humble and willing enough to receive grace, and to repent and turn to Christ. If my people will humble themselves and pray, praying corporately even as Jairus does personally, undone, and open.

As Jesus finds his voice and his role, he is continually confronted with expectations. He is expected to stick to the strictness of the law, the traditions of staying separate from the unclean, of always maintaining a posture and a portrayal of honor. And yet, Jesus breaks protocol and disappoints such expectations regularly. And he consistently goes back to the two great commandments, he reduces the tradition, encapsulates the tradition, interprets the whole tradition through the two great commandments – love the Lord your God with your whole

heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. Love and grace are his greatest interest.

And it is moments like Jairus' being undone, when such lessons are most possible.

For as Shihab Nye writes:

You must wake up with sorrow.

You must speak to it till your voice

catches the thread of all sorrows

and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore.

I would rephrase slightly, it is only grace and humility that makes sense anymore.

## 2 Chronicles 7:12-18

### *God's Second Appearance to Solomon*

<sup>12</sup> Then the LORD appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: "I have heard your prayer, and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. <sup>13</sup> When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, <sup>14</sup> if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. <sup>15</sup> Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place. <sup>16</sup> For now I have chosen and consecrated this house so that my name may be there forever; my eyes and my heart will be there for all time. <sup>17</sup> As for you, if you walk before me, as your father David walked, doing according to all that I have commanded you and keeping my statutes and my ordinances, <sup>18</sup> then I will establish your royal throne, as I made covenant with your father David saying, 'You shall never lack a successor to rule over Israel.'

*Jesus Heals a Centurion's Servant*

*(Mt 8:5–13)*

7 After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. <sup>2</sup> A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. <sup>3</sup> When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. <sup>4</sup> When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, “He is worthy of having you do this for him, <sup>5</sup> for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us.” <sup>6</sup> And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; <sup>7</sup> therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. <sup>8</sup> For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this,’ and the slave does it.” <sup>9</sup> When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” <sup>10</sup> When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

*A Girl Restored to Life and a Woman Healed*

*(Mt 9:18–26; Lk 8:40–56)*

<sup>21</sup> When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. <sup>22</sup> Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet <sup>23</sup> and begged him repeatedly, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.” <sup>24</sup> So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. <sup>25</sup> Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. <sup>26</sup> She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. <sup>27</sup> She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, <sup>28</sup> for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” <sup>29</sup> Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. <sup>30</sup> Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” <sup>31</sup> And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can

you say, ‘Who touched me?’ ”<sup>32</sup> He looked all around to see who had done it.<sup>33</sup> But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.<sup>34</sup> He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

<sup>35</sup> While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader’s house to say, “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?”<sup>36</sup> But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe.”<sup>37</sup> He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James.<sup>38</sup> When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly.<sup>39</sup> When he had entered, he said to them, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.”<sup>40</sup> And they laughed at him. Then 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.<sup>41</sup> He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha cum,” which means, “Little girl, get up!”<sup>42</sup> And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement.<sup>43</sup> He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.