

## “Desperate times ask for risky actions”

**Mark 5:21-40** (Jairus’ daughter and the woman who touched Jesus’ cloak)  
Reflection for June 28, 2009



Years ago a good college friend of mine invited me to his parents’ place one day; I can’t recall the occasion, but I vividly remember stepping into their living room and being dumb-founded to see the walls literally covered with hundreds decorative tiles and plates and little plaques! They all had Bible passages on them and if it wasn’t literal passages from the Bible it was little prayers or some religious saying or rhyme. Turns out his mom collected them. “Some people collect Barbie dolls or books or stamps, I collect these,” she told me. And as I was reading them she cheerfully said, “I don’t really read the Bible or pray much; why should I when I’m surrounded by God’s word and prayers every day?”

In a sense I guess we’re all surrounded by God’s word. We all have our favourite Bible passages and Bible stories, and many of us will have their favourite Bible books. My favourite Bible book is Mark, from which we read this morning. Mark was the very first Gospel to be written, about 40 years after Jesus’ death. It quickly became the benchmark for Matthew and Luke, who used Mark as their springboard for their gospels. You’ll find entire sections of Mark in their gospels, sometimes literally, sometimes embellished or added to, or with a slightly different point of view. But it all comes back to Mark where it all started.

Mark has a beautiful, deceptively simple style of writing. These days we’d say: less is more. It’s the shortest of all the gospels, but also the most powerful: it’s first and foremost about what Jesus *did*, only in the second place about what he *said*.

For Mark, Jesus is all about *doing*, not so much about talking.

He’s also a master storyteller; just look at this morning’s passage: in just 22 sentences, Mark vividly paints this complex story. It’s so visual it could be a film script. We can see the hustle and bustle, we feel the people crowd in on Jesus, pushing him around, the disciples overwhelmed, not able to deal with the situation. Then out of this crowd, 2 individual stories emerge, two parallel stories of 2 desperate people at their wit’s end.

Mark loves to tell parallel stories, stories that seem to repeat other, but always with a twist; it’s a Mark thing: there are 2 stories of dangerous sea crossing; 2 exorcisms, 2 wilderness feedings, and here: 2 healing stories rolled into one. But why tell a story twice? It seems a bit odd to do... But if we look closer, we see that the second story

mirrors the first; it reflects the first story. And as you know: reflections *seem* exactly the same as the original, except... everything is reversed, flipped around. And Mark uses device that to show how Jesus turns things around, puts the status quo inside out. In Jesus' reality, Mark seems to say, things are the reverse of our reality.

Now we just don't have the time to look at all the mirror-images in this story and what they mean; a Bible study group would be more appropriate for this. This morning we just focus a bit more on the two desperate main characters: on the one hand Jairus, a high-ranking religious leader whose daughter is dying; on the other hand a nameless sick woman.

To fully appreciate this story it's essential to realize that this woman is not just sick. It's much worse than that. She has been hemorrhaging, bleeding for 12 long years. This automatically makes her an outcast, quite literally an "untouchable". In Mark's time, women who were having their period were considered "impure" and had to remove themselves for 7 days from society. To our modern ears this sounds bizarre, but 2000 years ago this was a big deal; so much in fact, that should she ignore this law and visit the temple and was found out, she could be killed! Meanwhile, everyone and everything the woman touched also was defiled and had to be ritually cleaned. Just read Leviticus 15 for the details. After those 7 days the woman was allowed back into society, but only after presenting herself to a priest first for a ritual sacrifice that would make her officially clean again. Now if this was the law for women having their period, imagine what the law would have said about this woman who had been bleeding for 12 straight years. There was no way she would ever be clean, no one would want to associate with her; on top of that, she was poor, having lost all of her money to "doctors", quacks who would milk their gullible victims for every penny they had. This woman might just as well be dead. And that's exactly what Mark is telling us.

These are 2 stories about death; death *and* resurrection.

Then there is Jairus, a high-ranking priest whose 12-year old daughter is dying and he doesn't know what to do (two more parallels here: 12 years and 12 years). The esteemed Jairus comes to Jesus, the crowd recognize him and respectfully let him through. Jairus pleads for help, he doesn't know where to turn. This Jesus, this healer is his last resort. Now if you are slightly familiar with the gospels, you'll know that Jesus and the religious establishment don't get along very well. In fact, the high priests accuse Jesus of being possessed by the devil and are looking for ways to silence him. So here is this priest in broad daylight, witnessed by a big crowd who want to hear every word he's saying, asking Jesus to come to his house and save his daughter. In other words, Jairus is breaking the priesthood's ranks. Breaking the ranks means he can be snubbed, ridiculed, possibly even banned from the prestigious priesthood, a well-paying position with a lot of status and perks. That takes a lot of guts. Guts fuelled by despair...

Meanwhile, with everyone focused on the scene of Jairus in front of Jesus, the nameless sick woman sees her chance and sneaks up to Jesus who's not paying attention to what's happening behind him. She knows she is not allowed to touch anyone or anything, and might even be killed if she gets caught touching (read: defiling) a spiritual leader... But she, too has nothing to lose and quickly touches Jesus' cloak... She is healed *instantly*. In fact, she is healed twice; Mark says: "Immediately her bleedings stopped" (that's one); "and she felt in her body that she was healed." (two). Markus seems to say: not only her bleedings stopped, she was healed *all over*, body *and* soul. This woman was brought back from the dead, just as Jesus brings Jairus's daughter back to from the dead.

Two parallel stories – but with a twist. The twist with the sick woman is, she gets healed without Jesus even aware of it until *after* the fact. Makes you think, doesn't it?

The other twist is: who is the more significant character here? Church official Jairus or the untouchable woman..? Jesus interrupts his conversation with Jairus to fully focus on the woman. He even calls her "daughter", in those days the highest compliment a leader could pay someone (plus, this story is now about 2 daughters). And by doing so, Jesus reverses the socially accepted order, as he would do again and again. The impure, ignored, nameless woman comes first, and only then the high-ranking church official. The first will be last, the last will be first... That's what separates our two characters; and what do they have in common? Faith. Faith and hope against all odds; faith, even when there's nowhere to turn. Faith without a safety net.

Every now and then I think back of my fiend's mom, surrounded by God's word, yet so far removed from it. Looking back now it's obvious she was lonely and yearning for something. Maybe she felt empty and thought that those Bible words and prayers on the walls surrounding her would magically save her. Just say the magic words... But faith doesn't work like that, there's no magic involved and can be scary. So what *is* involved? Three things, according to this passage.

First: acknowledging our helplessness; we can't make it on our own.

Then: take action, step out of your shell, breaking some of the patterns society has taught us.

And last: it involves taking risks. Big risks. These risks will vary from person to person and may not always be as dramatic as in Jairus' and the nameless woman's case. But risks are definitely involved.

For Mark, faith is expressed in what you do, not just what you say or sing or recite in church, although it's a big part of it. But all those words are empty if they aren't followed by actions, risky actions. Actions that flip our reality into the reality of God's kingdom of justice and wholeness for all, through Jesus.

Amen.