

Provocative Love

Mark 5:21-43

For the last several years I've had the privilege of being on the faculty at Veritas Christian Academy in Wayland, where I serve as the chaplain and a Bible teacher. More specifically, I teach 5th and 6th grade Bible, which, if you're an educator, or a parent of middle-schoolers, you know is not the easiest age to manage in a classroom context. Especially if you're a novice teacher like me.

And so chaos is not an inappropriate description of what our class sometimes devolves into. The side conversations, giggling, talking out of turn, innumerable other distractions—attention focused everywhere but on what I'm trying to teach. And so sometimes, in order to break through that chaos and regain the class's attention, teachers have to do something surprising. Something provocative and unexpected. My default is to raise my voice. Some teachers use a bell. Sometimes it's more effective to be silent, to just stop teaching. Or to be specific, and call a student out. Whatever the tactic, eventually, the students realize something's different, stop what they're doing, and look up.

In the same way, Jesus, in order to get our attention amid the chaos of this fallen world, sometimes does something provocative in order to pry our eyes off the chaos, and get us to look up. To see him. And he does it not to be edgy or out of offense; he does it for the same reason he does everything—out of love.

And that's been our goal this fall—to meditate on the heart of Jesus as it's revealed in his interactions with others. To see how Jesus loved the people he encountered, that we might see his love for us, to better receive that love and share it with others.

This morning that brings us to a story in the Gospel of Mark, ch. 5, where we encounter the provocative love of Christ. As we saw earlier in the reading, this passage picks up the story of two different people, who are completely unrelated, yet whose lives intersect in surprising ways.

The first person we meet is one of the rulers of a local synagogue, a man named Jairus. And he comes to Jesus in desperation, humility, and faith. Seeing Jesus, "he fell at his feet and implored him earnestly, saying, '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'" (vv. 22-23).

The desperation here is obvious. There is perhaps no greater fear for a parent than losing their child. We know from v. 42 that the girl is just twelve years old—she'd be a sixth-grader in our day. And we know from this same account in Luke's Gospel this is his only daughter (Lk. 8:42). Losing a child is a terrifying prospect, but losing your only child is an unimaginable horror.

There no greater fear for a parent, because there's no deeper pain for a parent. Carissa and I know this pain in a slightly muted sense, having lost three children to miscarriage. It's the pain that Emilie Cadiche is living right now, after burying her only child, Sammy, two weeks ago. We need to continue to pray for her. And some of you here, too, know the full depths of this unspeakable pain. You know exactly what Jairus is experiencing, and you know the desperation that would drive you to track down the man who is said to be Israel's Messiah, who has a growing reputation as one who can heal diseases. Maybe he can do what no one else is able to do, and prevent her death.

Jairus comes in desperation. But he also comes in humility and faith. He kneels before Jesus, and he speaks with faith in Jesus' ability to heal. "Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live."

And Jesus goes with him. And it's as they're making their way to Jairus's home that we encounter the second person in our story—a woman whose desperation, while taking a different shape than Jairus's, is no less real, and no less severe. Verse 25: "And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse" (vv. 25-26).

Just as some of you know the heartache of losing a child, some of you know the gut punch of chronic illness. The unrelenting physical pain. The empty promises of new treatments. The dashed hopes of making improvement. The overwhelming medical bills. The inability to do what ought to be normal things in life, like going to the bathroom by yourself, or feeding yourself. The slow erosion of dignity.

That is this woman's world. She has lived with a chronic discharge of blood that has robbed her of life. Both in terms of the physical pain, but also her livelihood. She has spent everything she has chasing a cure, and is worse now than when she began. She has nothing left. More than that, her condition has left her in continual state of ritual impurity. Under ancient Israel's law, there were several things that could make you ritually unclean, even if just temporarily. Menstruation was one of them (cf. Lev. 15:19-30), which meant that during a woman's cycle, she couldn't gather with the rest of God's people for worship, lest God's tabernacle become defiled. Stretch that to twelve years—twelve years of pain, of destitution, of isolation, of being unable to gather with God's people. That's a pretty desperate situation.

And yet, while her desperation takes a different shape than Jairus's, it's interesting to notice how their stories intersect here as they encounter Jesus at the same time. There's the chronological parallel—while Jairus is terrified of losing his twelve-year-old daughter, this woman has suffered from a discharge of blood for twelve years. That's just an interesting connection. And there's the similarity that both come to Jesus not just in desperation, but in humility and faith. Just as Jairus knelt before Jesus, so this woman will kneel (v. 33). His humility was bold—he came up to Jesus and implored him; hers was timid—she crept up behind him and quietly touched his garment (v. 27). But just as Jairus believed that Jesus could heal his daughter, so the woman says to herself, "If I touch even his garments, I will be made well" (5:28). She too has faith. And she was right—v. 29: "And immediately the flow of blood dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease."

But perhaps what unites their stories more than anything else is the provocative way Jesus interacts with each of them. There's something surprising and unexpected in the way that Jesus handles each of their requests for healing. For the woman, rather than allowing her to sneak off having been made well, but never having faced Jesus, he calls her out. Verse 30: "And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone out from him, immediately turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my garments?'" He calls the woman out. But in stopping and doing so, his conversation with the woman creates a delay in getting Jairus's house. And that delay, we learn in v. 35, results in the death of Jairus's daughter. They didn't make it in time. "While he was still speaking [with the woman], there came from the ruler's house some who said, 'Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?'" (v. 35).

Jesus handles their requests in strange ways. In ways that result in fear for both parties—the woman fears that she's in trouble, and the father fears that all hope is lost for his daughter.

Why does Jesus do that? Create this awkward moment, provoke fear in those looking for healing—calling the woman out of her hiding, and allowing himself to be delayed such that the little girl dies? Neither of those responses were necessary. The reality is, Jesus didn't need to go to Jairus's house or actually touch the girl physically in order to heal her. He could have just said the word. That's what he did with the centurion's servant in Matthew 8. Nor did he need to ask who touched him. That's such a strange moment. It puzzles us, because . . . *he's Jesus*. Of course he knows who touched him. With respect to his divinity, Jesus is omniscient. Remember back to Mark 2 where he alone knew what the paralyzed man needed, and he was able to hear the thoughts of the Pharisees (cf. Mk. 2:1-12)? And it puzzled his disciples, because everybody was touching Jesus. Verse 31: "And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, "Who touched me?"'"

So why does Jesus do it? Why does he call the woman out? Why does he allow himself to be delayed?

It's not for his benefit. Which means that it must be for their benefit—and for ours—in order to reveal his love.

The truth of the gospel is that Jesus came not merely to rescue us from hardship—though he cares deeply about our trials. He came not merely to rescue us from something, but *to* someone—to himself.

Our temptation in the midst of hardship—especially the grueling and gut wrenching kind of things these two people faced—is to become overwhelmed by our trials, such that that's all we can see or think about or talk about. We're suffocating in them. We're drowning in pain, drowning in sorrow, drowning in fear as our world falls apart around us. Like being caught in a riptide, we're struggling for oxygen, fighting to get free, desperate for relief. We want to be rescued, and we don't really care who does it.

But Jesus came not just to rescue us from something, but *to* himself. And because we don't always see that, in his love, he does something provocative to break through the chaos and get us to look up. He's like the lifeguard who, because the drowning victim is thrashing so wildly and freaking out, has to bring them down under water with him for just a moment, to get their

attention and calm them down, so that he can save them. Or like the teacher at the front of the classroom, who does something surprising, something provocative—he delays the lesson, he calls out the student—in order to get us all to stop and look up at him.

Because *he's* the main point of salvation. Relationship with him. He didn't spill his blood just so life could go easier for us; he gave his life on the cross to deal with our sin and reconcile us to God—to restore our broken relationship. And he rose from the dead to bring new life and renewal into this fallen world. And so Jesus doesn't just rescue the people in our story from a hard situation; he invites them into relationship with him—a relationship marked by faith.

Notice again how both respond to Jesus' surprising actions with fear. Verse 32: “And [Jesus] looked around to see who had [touched him]. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came *in fear and trembling* and fell down before him and told him the whole truth” (vv. 32-33). Verse 35: “While he was still speaking, there came from the ruler's house some who said, ‘Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?’ But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, ‘Do not *fear*, only believe’” (vv. 35-36).

They're startled by Jesus' actions. They're afraid—she's afraid she's in trouble; he's afraid his daughter is lost for good. But in the face of that fear, Jesus calls them to faith. He commends the woman: “Daughter, your *faith* has made you well . . .” (v. 34). He redirects the man: “Do not fear, only *believe*” (v. 36). He's not content to simply rescue them or heal them; he draws them to himself in the process. He invites them to step out of their fear and replace it with faith. The woman must come forward. The father must believe in the resurrection. They must have faith *specifically in Jesus*.

Because faith is only as good as the object in which you put it. So he's not calling them to some vague spirituality, as though ‘faith’ by itself has some sort of power (regardless of what that faith is in). Even less does he call them to some generic ‘power of positive thinking.’ Jesus calls them to believe in him, because it's the *person* of Christ who wields the power, not the idea of Christ. Jesus is not just a doctrine; he's *a person*—a person who loves his people and has the power to heal them and who *draws them into relationship with himself*.

And notice what that relationship looks like. With the woman, who's so afraid. Afraid she's done something wrong by reaching out in her desperation. Jesus doesn't call her out because he's upset, but because she has no need to be afraid or ashamed. He calls her out so she can know his love. Look at how tenderly he speaks to her: “Daughter”—he calls her *daughter*—“your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease” (v. 34). He commends her for her faith, he speaks peace over her life—*peace*, the very thing she hasn't tasted for over a decade. Jesus sends her forth in peace. He heals her disease, but he brings her into relationship with himself.

And look at his relationship with the man, Jairus. We don't know how Jairus reacted to the delay among the crowds, whether he was upset or uneasy (I would have been). We do know, based on Jesus' response, that when he receives news of his daughter's passing, he is afraid. But look at how Jesus loves him.

He speaks words of truth and comfort: “Do not fear, only believe” (v. 36). He makes space for the father amid the chaos. He only takes a few of his disciples, not the whole group. And when they get to the house, he clears out everyone and gets rid of all the commotion. He loves the father by giving him space, not just to grieve, but to take on board what’s about to happen. And only those who believe are permitted to be there and see it. The crowd mocks him when he says she’s only sleeping. Because she wasn’t only sleeping; she was dead (cf. Lk. 8:55). But Jesus is about to wake her from the dead. And so he “took the child’s father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was” (v. 40). “Taking her by the hand he said to her, ‘Talitha cumi,’ which means, ‘Little girl, I say to you, arise’” (v. 41). The gentleness of Jesus. “And immediately the girl got up and began walking (for she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement. And he strictly charged them that no one should know this . . .” And then watch this: “and told them to give her something to eat” (vv. 42-3). That’s a remarkable little note there. He loves the parents by raising their girl from the dead, and then he loves the little girl by reminding her parents amid their joy and amazement, that she’s going to need to eat. She just came back from the dead; she’s going to be pretty weak and need some care.

Jesus, in his love, addresses their pain. He delivers them from their trial. But not without drawing them to himself in faith. He came not merely to rescue us from something, but to someone—to himself.

Some of you know Pastor Paul Reid, who recently retired as Senior Pastor at one of our sister churches, Hope International in Waltham. Paul retired early, not because he wanted to, but because he had to. You might say that he was brought there by the provocative love of Christ.

He’s collected his story in a short memoir, and I want to read to you from the introduction:

It started with an itch; June, 2014. I had itching sensations any seeming reason—no rash, no exposure to anything unusual. The itching strangely morphed over several weeks to a slight numbness in my fingers and toes, and then electrical sensations in the lower arms and legs. In the next months there was a continual struggle with these symptoms—struggles to sleep, increasingly unusual sensations, headaches, loss of energy. Then came the pain.

My question that summer change from, “Is something wrong?” to, “What is wrong?” I started the long road to find a diagnosis, which would last two-and-a-half years. I traveled the offices of oncologist, neurologist, infectious disease specialist, and hematologists; tests, lots of tests. After nearly two years of searching I still had no answers; all I knew was what it wasn’t.

At the end of 2015 . . . I was put in touch with the Undiagnosed Disease Program of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, MD. After some hesitation, I applied for this program and was accepted, traveling there in February 2016. I spent five days undergoing tests. . . . The explained they would do a full genetic sequencing in a search which would take at least six more months. . . .

On September 30, 2016, Dr. M. from the NIH arranged to talk with me by phone. The context and undercurrents suggested something was discovered.

That was when he told me it was Fahr's [an extremely rare, genetic, degenerative disease].

This has been one of the best things that has ever happened to me.

No, I'm not crazy. I believe God knows what He's doing. I've struggled through anxiety, fatigue, pain, sleeplessness; it's been hard. This road has been, and continues to be, the most challenging road I have walked on. The only reason for this being a good road is Jesus Christ; all the credit for the good part goes to Him. I have found with Him, hard roads become good roads. I have learned so much, been driven deeper, found comfort, and been closer to Him because of this. I would not trade this away if given the chance.¹

So what does that mean for us in terms of receiving Jesus' love, and sharing Jesus' love? That's a question we want to ask each week as we 'see how he loved them'—how does that impact us?

First, in terms of receiving Jesus' love, when we find ourselves trapped in hardship, or terrified of loss, we need to pray for deliverance. Both of these people called out to Jesus in their own way. But we need to remember that his goal is not merely to fix us, or give us an easy life, but to draw us to himself. To draw us into a relationship marked by faith.

Faith is clinging to Jesus. When all we can see is what's falling apart around us—the foreclosure notice, the terminal diagnosis, the dreaded phone call in the middle of the night. When what we *can't* see is what in the world God is doing through this, or how he could possibly reverse a situation that seems too far gone, or how any of this could in any way turn out for good.

And yet, Hebrews 11:1 tells us that “faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of *what we do not see*.” It's trusting in the unseen God, who is at work in the unseen realm, who has power and authority over everything—seen and unseen. Trusting Jesus is not about having all of the answers. It's not even the absence of doubt or questions. Trusting Jesus is what we do in the midst of our doubts and questions, our fears and frustrations. We cling to Jesus.

We don't presume upon him or demand that he answer our situation in a favorable way. But neither do we doubt that he can. Faith in Jesus involves both *humility* and *hope*. The humility to recognize that God is God; he's the one in charge, that we are in desperate need of him, that he has the right to answer our prayers in whatever way fits into this plan. The humility to recognize that suffering is not an accident, as though God slipped off his throne for a minute and things kind of went haywire, but that it is one of the graces God uses to bring us to the end of ourselves, like the people in this story, to the point of desperation so that we'll finally look up and see him. Faith involves humility, but it also involves hope. Hope that God is in control, that he wants to show his love and power and mercy to his children. Hope that the same God who made our bodies is able to heal them and remake them—to remove the cancer, to take away this disease—believing that he can and pleading with him to do it!

But—and this is crucial—faith in Jesus does not look for answers in this life only. Faith realizes that even when God rescues us from a situation or trial right here and now, all his answers will come ultimately in heaven and the new creation to come. Which gives us perspective when God's answer today is sometimes no.

¹ Paul S. Reid, *Light & Momentary: An Account of Suffering and Joy* (self-published, 2018), 2-4.

Jesus is not just trying to fix our lives; he's drawing us to himself. Do we hear his call in the midst of our trials; are we willing to stop and look up and see him—the main point of our salvation?

And as we come alongside others in their crises—others who don't know Jesus yet, and others who do—are we helping them likewise to look above their hardship and see Jesus?

When someone you love faces a trial, our immediate impulse is to try to rescue them from it. To address the situation, the circumstance. And if we can't fix it, then what we do is pray that it will be fixed.

And that's not entirely bad. But if Jesus came not just to fix us, but to draw us to himself, are we not missing something in our love for others, if our actions and our prayers are only about fixing, rescuing, delivering?

We need to love people in crisis or need in tangible ways, but we also need to point them to Jesus. Because he might be trying to do something in their lives other than just get them out of a bind. In fact, I'm just going to say: *he is doing something in their lives more than just getting them out of a bind*. He is always, in his love, through our circumstances, drawing us closer and closer to himself.

And so does our care reflect that? Maybe fixing the situation immediately isn't always what's best, but helping them see Jesus in the situation. Do our prayers reflect that? Are we praying only for deliverance, or are also praying for transformation? That God would accomplish his redemptive work in their life through this situation, and draw them closer to himself?

So grieve with them. Help them. But help them look up and see Jesus. Don't let your love soften the provocation of Jesus' love, which is meant to draw them to the main thing—to him. Because Jesus came not to just to save us from hard things, but to save us for himself.