

The Place of Last Resort

Luke 8:40-56

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ June 10, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

⁴⁰ Now when Jesus returned, a crowd welcomed him, for they were all expecting him. ⁴¹ Then a man named Jairus, a synagogue leader, came and fell at Jesus' feet, pleading with him to come to his house ⁴² because his only daughter, a girl of about twelve, was dying.

As Jesus was on his way, the crowds almost crushed him. ⁴³ And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years, but no one could heal her. ⁴⁴ She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped. ⁴⁵ "Who touched me?" Jesus asked. When they all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you." ⁴⁶ But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me." ⁴⁷ Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed. ⁴⁸ Then he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace."

⁴⁹ While Jesus was still speaking, someone came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. "Your daughter is dead," he said. "Don't bother the teacher anymore." ⁵⁰ Hearing this, Jesus said to Jairus, "Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed." ⁵¹ When he arrived at the house of Jairus, he did not let anyone go in with him except Peter, John and James, and the child's father and mother. ⁵² Meanwhile, all the people were wailing and mourning for her. "Stop wailing," Jesus said. "She is not dead but asleep." ⁵³ They laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. ⁵⁴ But he took her by the hand and said, "My child, get up!" ⁵⁵ Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up. Then Jesus told them to give her something to eat. ⁵⁶ Her parents were astonished, but he ordered them not to tell anyone what had happened. (Luke 8:40-56, NRSV)

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Our story this morning opens with expectation. It's the perfect way for a story to open, especially one that ends with God showing up in ways that make everything new. Luke tells us that when Jesus returned to the Jewish side of the lake the crowds were waiting for him,

full of expectation. What would this miracle worker do now? What wild thing would he say next?

It's not a bad posture to take. When you woke up this morning did you wake up full of expectation, anticipating that you were about to enter into a day where you would meet the living God in some real way? As a friend of mine likes to say, if the resurrection is a reality then Jesus, by the power of the Spirit, is actually walking around our world today. Do you believe that? Do you expect to encounter the living Christ today in ways that make everything new?

Well, according to Luke there were at least two people in the crowd that day who came especially full of expectation. Their stories are woven together here in a beautiful way.

The first is a man named Jairus. He's the leader of the local synagogue, meaning he holds a place of prominence in the community. And yet, not long after Jesus climbs out of the boat Jairus approaches him and falls at his feet. It was a striking posture of humility for one of such high standing, and it ought to remind us immediately of the possessed man in the tombs – from the story last week – who also threw himself down in that same place at Jesus' feet. These are two men at polar opposite ends of the social spectrum who both, in relationship to Jesus, find themselves in the very same desperate place before him.

Jairus, like the Gerasene demoniac before him, is at the end of his rope. Jesus has become his last resort. His little girl lies at home on her death bed. She is his only daughter, the apple of his eye. She's dying. It's just a matter of time. And so with literally nowhere else to turn, Jairus turns to Jesus. Likely he has heard, or maybe even witnessed, him perform miracles before. He comes hoping Jesus has at least one more miracle up his sleeve. I hope you can feel some sense of what it must have been like to have been in his shoes. If your child was dying you would do anything to save that child.

In response, we're not told that Jesus says anything to Jairus, but we are told that he immediately turns to follow Jairus to his house. And the crowd, of course, follows as they press in on him. The word for 'press' here is the same verb Jesus used earlier in this chapter in the parable of the sower when Jesus talked about the

weeds that choked out the good seeds in the field.¹ Picture the area in front of the stage at a huge concert, body smashed up against body. Everybody wants to get a front row seat to the miracle they anticipate is about to happen.

In some ways it's the perfect picture of what always happens around Jesus. He is a spectacle, after all. Nobody can really ignore Jesus. But many people come simply because they are curious. Only a few come with desperate faith. It might be true even here this morning. How many of us really come to Jesus today with desperate faith, with last-resort faith, with 'if you don't help me now Jesus I'll be sunk' faith? We never hear anything more about the curiosity seekers, the ones that crush around Jesus but never fall at his feet in desperation. It's only the desperate ones who get transformed.

Well, along the way to Jairus' house another one of these desperate ones shows up. This time it's a woman. We don't know her name but we do know her circumstances. For twelve years, coincidentally as long as Jairus' daughter has been alive, this woman has been bleeding uncontrollably. The context leads us to believe she suffered from a menstrual disorder, a disorder which not only caused her to suffer with physical symptoms, but social and spiritual symptoms as well. For reasons of public health, and also because of a belief that physical illness or disability was the direct result of sin, Jewish law made absolutely clear that such a woman was physically and spiritually unclean. Leviticus 15 is clear, **"If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days...all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness."**² Any bed in which she slept or chair in which she sat was considered unclean. And if you touched such a woman or touched things she had touched during her time of impurity then you were also considered unclean. In verse 31 we read, **"Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, so that they do not die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle [or presence] that is in their midst."**

Let this sink in for a minute. For twelve years this woman not only bled constantly but, because of her bleeding, she was cut off from her family, her community, her place of worship, and ultimately her God. She was literally an untouchable. And we learn from Mark's account of this story that she had spent every last dime she had on doctors trying to find a cure. Nothing worked. The disease bled her dry of everything of worth in her life. She, like Jairus beside

her, is at the end of her rope. And so she determines that day by the lakeside to take a risk on Jesus. She is not just a curiosity seeker. She is desperate and Jesus is her last resort. And it's not just the physical condition. That was bad enough. Worse was the shame, that for all these years she was considered unclean. People did not want touch her. God himself, she believed, did want to touch her. Can you imagine?

The crowd that day works in her favor. She never would have approached Jesus out in the open. Nobody would have allowed her to. Anybody she touched became unclean themselves and so if she'd just tried to walk up to Jesus in plain view of others and touched him she would have been severely punished. So the crowd, you see, provides her some anonymity. As she forces her way through the bodies to get close to Jesus in the middle, just imagine how many people she polluted along the way. If only they had known who it was shoving there beside them. And when she gets close enough she discreetly reaches out her hand and does something she probably hadn't done in 12 years. She touches somebody. On the very fringes of the garment that was draped over Jesus' left shoulder and hung down his back, she touches him.

Truth be told, the faith she has here is full of superstition. It's superstitious to believe that Jesus' clothing itself has power to heal. Several hundred years ago the church was full of this sort of superstition. In the 15th century, when reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin were working to restore the church to its biblical roots, relics were all the rage, these holy objects from the past people superstitiously believed carried with them the power of God. One German bishop in those days claimed to have in his possession two "jugs" of wine from the wedding at Cana, two vials of milk from the breasts of the Virgin Mary, actual manna from Moses' sojourn in the wilderness, branches from the burning bush (singled, but intact), numerous pieces from the bodies of the twelve apostles (43 from Peter alone!), an actual piece of the body of Jesus, and even a single piece of the soil from which Adam was created!³

We may laugh, but to some extent this sort of superstition has always been alive in the minds of people of faith. Think of how many people today, for example, flock to sites in the Holy Land where Jesus supposedly walked, or want to be baptized in the very river in which Jesus was baptized, imagining that somehow as they contact these physical places they will have a better chance of finding healing, or power, or grace.

¹ See Luke 8:7.

² Leviticus 15:25. See vs. 25-30 for the further description of this purity law.

³ Eric Metaxas, *Martin Luther* (Viking Press, 2017), 259-60.

All I'm saying here is that this woman's faith wasn't perfect. And yet, it was still strong enough to lead her to take a risk on Jesus. And that's the value of faith isn't it? A Christian writer named Fredrick Buechner says, "Faith is better understood as a verb than a noun, as a process than a possession. Faith is not being sure where you're going but going anyway."⁴ This woman's superstitious faith certainly could not have assured her of the outcome of her actions. For all she knew, this whole thing would backfire. She wouldn't be healed. Or she'd be outed there in the crowd and punished severely for spreading to others what others imagined to be the impurity that was in her. Such an imperfect faith and yet a faith that led her to step forward anyway and, as a last resort, risk everything on Jesus.

This woman sits here today. Right? In some of us, both men and women, there hides the same thing that once hid in her. So I ask you, where is there shame buried in your life, that which is a part of you that you believe, if revealed, would make you untouchable by others and perhaps even by God? What is it in you that you don't want anybody else to see? Stubborn weakness. Humiliating failure. An embarrassing illness. Some terrible past decision or action. Some present struggle with sin. Where is the shame that lurks beneath the surface in you? If you have tried every other way to rid yourself of shame but come up empty, maybe you also are at the place of last resort. With nothing else to lose, maybe it's time for you to step towards Jesus, flawed faith and all, and take a risk that his touch might set you free. If you do, maybe what happened to this woman can also happen to you.

Luke tells us that as soon as she touched Jesus her bleeding stopped. Imagine the rush of warmth that must have filled her abdomen and the rush of joy that must have washed over her spirit! But then before she can even enjoy the moment, Jesus stops in his tracks, turns around, and asks the crowd, "**Who just touched me?**" The tone of his voice must have sounded somewhat accusatory because everybody at once denied touching him. "It wasn't me, Jesus. Keeping my hands to myself here. I'm just here for the show." But Peter, in true form, says what everybody else is thinking. "**Um...Master...not sure if you noticed but the whole crowd is pushing up against you. Who knows how many people have touched you?**"⁵ But Jesus was insistent, "**No, somebody touched me; I know that power has gone out from me.**"

Imagine how this woman must have been feeling at this moment. She's already on her way out of there, as we're

told that she had to come back. Would her healing be taken away? Would she be rebuked and punished for what she'd done? What would others think? It's a very bad moment for her because to step forward would be, for her, another giant risk. But she does so anyway. She's trembling, maybe with sadness as much as with fear, as she falls at Jesus' feet, the place of last resort. And she tells her whole story – who she was, what she'd done, what had happened to her as a result.

Why did Jesus call her out? Why not just let her go on her way, healed at last? Why put her through such a moment of terrible agony? Can you see that his doing so was nothing but pure compassion? This woman needed to be physically healed, which she had been. But her shame was a deeper burden which also needed to be healed. If she was ever to be received back into normal religious and social life, others needed to know that she had been cured.⁶ Her renewed status needed to become a matter of public knowledge. And so in front of everybody Jesus declares, "**Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.**" With these words Jesus assures not only the woman, but all those who might never have believed it otherwise, that she has no shame before God who now considers her a beloved daughter. If that is her status before God, it also ought to be her status before all others.

Can you expect that the same result will occur if you find the faith it takes to come to that same place of last resort and fall at Jesus' feet to lay your shame there before him? I tell you that in that place you will find healing and peace in more abundance than you ever thought possible. Maybe today is the day for you to finally come to that place of last resort.

As you think about that, let's not forget Jairus. He's there, remember, watching all this unfold as his daughter slips ever closer to the grave. And you can imagine what he's feeling. At first he must be infuriated. This is malpractice, right? Every doctor knows you must triage your patients. You don't take time to treat the chronic condition ahead of the life-threatening condition. The woman's bleeding can wait. It's waited for 12 years so what's one more hour. His daughter cannot wait. Why are we not running to her side? Why does God's agenda and timing for healing seem so different than what we think it ought to be? Maybe you've asked that question as well.

⁶ I'm indebted to this insight about Jesus' compassion, both here with the woman and below with the little girl, to Lean Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Luke* (Intervarsity Press, 1974), 177-181.

⁴ Fredrick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (Harper & Row, 1973), 25.

⁵ My paraphrase of verse 45 obviously.

But then all at once I imagine his fury turns to joy. When he sees the woman healed his faith must have been strengthened because if this miracle worker really can heal people in such astonishing ways, even heal a 12-year condition nobody else can heal, then certainly there's a good chance he can heal my daughter as well! Maybe I've bet on the right horse here!

But then, from fury to joy to despair. Even as Jesus is still speaking a messenger arrives with the worst possible news. **"Your daughter is dead. Don't bother the teacher anymore."** And with those words his last resort becomes a lost cause. His despair is visible to everybody, of course, as it would be with any parent just receiving word that their child has just died. Jesus sees his despair, the snuffing out of what was just before the growing spark of faith. And so as he turns to the man his words are few but they are full of promise, **"Do not fear. Only believe, and she will be saved."**

All at once Jairus finds himself in the very same place in which the woman found herself just moments before. Jairus now has to make the same decision, the decision whether or not to bet it all on Jesus. Her faith was full of superstition; his faith is full of doubts. Even Jesus can see that. The reasonable thing for him to do would be to thank Jesus for his time and go back home and bury his daughter. That's what his friends are telling him to do. Let it go. Let *her* go. Can you imagine what a disaster this would be if Jairus invites Jesus back and the funeral happens anyway? Your daughter is dead. Don't make things worse.

Jairus sits here today. I know he does. In some of us, both women and men, there hides the same thing that once hid in him. Where is the doubt which shoots holes all through your faith? What insurmountable obstacle do you face in your life right now, the kind of obstacle that reasonable people around you urge you to just accept and live with? Some illness, some pain, some diagnosis. Some relationship wrecked beyond repair with a friend, a child, a parent, a spouse. Some destructive part of your life that you've resigned is a burden you must always bear. A son or daughter who's too far down the wrong path. Some dream which has now turned into a dead end. If you have tried every other way to fix things and yet come up empty time and time again, maybe you are also at the place of last resort and ready to fall at Jesus' feet. Though your faith may be riddled with doubts, perhaps today you are ready to take the risk that his touch is able to make a way forward where none existed before. If so, what happened to Jairus might ultimately happen to you as well.

Jairus takes the risk. Against the counsel of his friends he leads Jesus back to his house. When they arrive the

curious crowds are kept at bay as Jesus only allows Jairus and his wife, along with three of his disciples, to enter the house where the corpse of the dead girl lay. On the way inside Jesus rebukes the people mourning outside the home. You see, in those days families hired professional mourners, flute players and women who were especially good at generating tears and wails of grief, to help mark the death of a loved one. **"Do not weep;"** Jesus tells them, **"for she is not dead but sleeping."** Their laughter in response is evidence that their tears were just for show.

But why make this miracle private? Why not let everybody inside to see this remarkable thing that God was about to do? What an opportunity for Jesus to publicize his cause and bring legitimacy to his ministry. But think about it. Everybody already knows the girl was dead, and so when she eventually walks out of the house alive the secret will never again be kept. (Which makes us wonder why Jesus ends by telling the parents to keep it a secret.) I think that what we have here once again is Jesus' compassion on display. Imagine this young girl waking up from death to find herself at the center of a gaping crowd of strangers. That's not what Jesus wants for this young girl. You see, healing is not a spectacle for Jesus and he does not see himself as a showman. For him, healing is about people and so compassion will always rule the day.

It's why when Jesus brings the little girl back to life he does so by touching her. He didn't need to touch her. His command to "Get up!" would have been enough. But remember, according to Jewish law, no righteous person in those days could touch a corpse and remain righteous. Leviticus 19:11 was clear: **"Those who touch the dead body of any human being shall be unclean for seven days."** Such persons could be cut off from Israel and excluded from even the very presence of God.⁷ Jesus didn't have to touch the girl's body but he did. And as he did he commanded, **"Child, get up!"** She did at once. Can you imagine? Can you imagine these parents, the joy they must have experienced in that moment? And there is Jesus, his compassion still on display as he tenderly suggests they get her something to eat. She's been dead, after all! She must be famished! After you've been dead, aren't you hungry!

Here's what I don't want you to miss. Two people both at the end of their rope come to Jesus as a last resort. They both end up at the place of last resort, desperate at Jesus' feet. They beg, but they don't have to beg. They just need to come and throw themselves in that place and, in doing so, acknowledge that there is no other way. As they do – don't miss it – Jesus welcomes each of them into his presence, close enough to touch,

⁷ See Leviticus 19:13

and in doing so takes their burdens upon himself. When the woman touches Jesus everybody else watched her impurity spread to him. When Jesus touches the dead girl the law of God declared the same thing happened again. In both cases, power goes out from him and into them. He is drained so that they can be filled, he is made impure so that they can be made pure, he becomes the one who is outcast so that they can become the one welcomed home.

You see, in these stories we are glimpsing, bit by bit, just who Jesus really is and just what it is that he came to achieve. In these two encounters we see Jesus do for two people what he ultimately came to do for us all. Because when the eternal Son of God literally took on human flesh and became one of us, and then went as one of us to the cross, the place of ultimate shame, and faced death, the great immovable obstacle we all face, he took upon himself that which was ours so that we might in turn take upon ourselves what was his, the very righteousness and belovedness of God.

Can you understand that Christ meets you in your shame this morning? Whatever it is that you hide beneath the surface, he sees it, he names it, he knows it, and he has taken it upon himself, all the way to cross, so that it no longer has any place in your life. Now, if you will only take the risk and bring your shame to the place of last resort, to the very feet of Jesus, you will not find yourself disappointed but will find yourself marked as a daughter of God, a son of God, who is now free to go in peace.

Can you also understand that Christ meets you in your desperation this morning? Whatever obstacle blocks your way today, no matter how seemingly insurmountable, that obstacle has already been overcome by Christ. I know you may be tempted to laugh at the thought, as others have laughed before you, but I urge you instead to take the risk and find enough faith to lead you to the place of last resort even if your belief is shot through with doubt. Can you have enough faith to believe what Paul believed when he wrote, **“I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, nor things present or things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**⁸

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You have heard God’s Word declared to you this morning. Now it is time for a response, as God’s Word always demands a response. What have you heard the Living God speak to you this morning through his

Word? I don’t pretend to know exactly what it is for each of you, though I suspect it likely has something to do with trusting him. Do you see Jesus as your last resort or are you still testing out some other options? Will you take a step of faith towards him, even a superstitious or doubt-filled step of faith? There is risk involved. People may laugh. Common sense stands against you. Shame is dangerous to uncover. The impossible mocks those who imagine a way forward.

In light of it all, what has Jesus said to you this morning? If you expected to meet him here there’s a good chance that you did. He’s walking around all over the place, you know. So what has he said to you and what are you now going to do about it?

We never again hear from the curiosity seekers that make up most of the crowd around Jesus. It’s only the desperate ones who fall at his feet in the place of last resort who we hear about because they are the ones who in the end find everything made new.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Luke 8:40-56 again. What do you notice here? What stands out to you?
2. When the woman was healed we are told that power went out from Jesus. What do you make of this? And do you think that Jesus truly was unaware of who it was that had touched him?
3. Was it insensitive for Jesus to stop and take time to engage with this woman when a little girl’s life hung in the balance?
4. Consider the faith of this woman and Jairus. How would you characterize it in each of them? Are they people of strong faith or weak faith? How does their faith compare to your faith?
5. Again, Fredrick Buchner says this about faith: “Faith is better understood as a verb than a noun, as a process than a possession. Faith is not being sure where you’re going but going anyway.” What do you think he means? Do you agree?
6. Where do you see yourself in this story?

⁸ Romans 8:38-39

7. When in your life have you been in that place of last resort, that place at Jesus' feet where he has become your only hope? How are you there now?
8. What specific step of faith (i.e. risk) is Jesus calling you to take today, some shame you need to expose or some insurmountable obstacle you need to believe is not insurmountable?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What are the many ways we see Jesus' love displayed in this passage? See if you can name at least ten.