

“Desperate Times Call for Desperate Measures”
Based on Mark 5:21-43
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Desperate times call for desperate measures. Well, at least that’s what I thought when my hairline began to recede at a faster and faster rate and I was too poor to afford Rogaine, that blood pressure medicine that is supposed to grow hair on some men, wink, wink. I found some consolation in the fact that just after I would have my hair cut, I looked the least bald. But it was clearly a losing battle. So I decided, “If I’m going to look bald, I may as well be bald,” and I enlisted a hairdresser friend to do the honors and I came out looking like this. Believe me, it could have been a lot worse. Before, my friends joked about my blinding people whenever I nodded. Now they just call me kiwi head. Desperation is surely a product of vanity.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. Well, at least that’s what I thought when I traded in my perfectly good Subaru hatchback on a new pickup truck a few years ago. I was young and foolish and thought I *needed* that truck to haul around my construction equipment. Too bad I neglected to find out how much the insurance would be before I bought it. The night I drove it home from the showroom, I didn’t sleep a minute because I was too busy trying to make sure I kept my dinner down. The desperation I felt before the purchase was nothing compared to the desperation I experienced once it was parked in my own

driveway. It was easily the biggest financial mistake of my young life and the next morning I was at the dealership even before they opened, begging the salesman to please take back this truck. As it turns out, that truck gave me 160,000 heavy duty miles and I was heartbroken to see it die an ignominious death, hanging from the hook of a junkyard wrecker. A happy ending aside, surely impulsiveness begets a sense of desperation.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. Well, at least that's what a certain woman thought when she saw an itinerant carpenter's son approach. It didn't matter that he was hurrying off to see about raising from the dead the daughter of an important man. Indeed, what could be done for a dead girl? Why should he waste his time on that girl when she herself, who was still alive, had been bleeding uncontrollably for twelve long years, twelve years during which she was unable to worship with her family, twelve years during which she was the ultimate outcast, twelve years when she was no better than a leper. If she could only touch a thread of even the fringe of his cloak, perhaps she could ease something about her situation. Truly, desperation is the companion of intense suffering.

My own episodes with desperation sound a little shallow compared to the situation of the woman in this evening's passage from Mark. Funny to say, but it's true: I am lucky that my desperation has been brought about by vanity and impulsiveness. I've been fortunate that I have never been truly, truly desperate,

desperate to the point of committing a crime. For this, I am grateful.

But what of those who really are desperate? Let's take a closer look at what really happened here in Mark. Jesus is on his way to the house of a fairly important Jewish leader, a desperate man whose daughter is near death. Jesus goes with him to heal this man's daughter and as Mark tells us, to lay his hand on her. We shall see that physical contact with Jesus is indeed the key part of the story, especially in light of what happens next: Jesus is touched by an unclean woman.

The woman who touches Jesus has everything going against her. She is ritually impure; if she was married, we can be sure that she didn't have relations with her husband for that would make him impure; we may suspect that her family has abandoned her because of her long-standing impurity since everything she touched had to be purified; she is most certainly poor, as we read that she spent all of her money on doctors. In order to understand her impurity and what it meant for Jesus that she touched him, we must look to the 15th chapter of Leviticus for in it we find that a menstruating woman was the most unclean of the unclean as far as the religious establishment saw it. This section is worth reading aloud and comes after a discussion of the impurity caused by a woman's *regular* monthly menstruation:

If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her impurity, or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her impurity, all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness; as in the days of her impurity, she shall be unclean. Every bed on which she lies during all the days of her discharge shall be treated as the bed of her impurity; and

everything on which she sits shall be unclean, as in the uncleanness of her impurity. Whoever touches these things shall be unclean, and shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. If she is cleansed of her discharge, she shall count seven days, and after that she shall be clean. You shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, so that they do not die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst.

I have to admit that I always get a kick out of reading these kinds of passages aloud in church because they are not the kind of thing we expect from our church services even though they are the kinds of things the writers of the Bible found important. Menstruation is a real life issue and the more real life issues the church takes on the better. And it was decidedly a real life issue for this woman who had been bleeding for twelve years to dare to reach out and touch Jesus. We just heard that anyone who touches a woman in her condition is impure until evening, even after he has washed. This woman has defiled Jesus by her desperate act. Imagine the dismay of the desperate father: to him, Jesus' standing before God is marred, tainted, perhaps his power no longer efficacious. How can Jesus now go and lay his hand on this dead girl? How could Jesus have the power to raise someone from the dead if he wasn't even fit to worship God, to be in the presence of God? Even if he were still able to save her, his impurity would then be spread to the girl. The hemorrhaging woman has ruined this father's last chance to save his daughter. How selfish she is, this woman who suddenly came from nowhere, to defile Jesus and rob a father of his little child! She is little better than a common criminal.

Now, here is a woman at the end of her rope, wondering, “why me, God?” desperate beyond measure to get her life back, willing to do anything, to take any risk to be well again, even cause someone else to be impure and cause another family incalculable grief. And Jesus credits it to her as faith. A crime has been committed and Jesus calls it faith. Is faith, then, the child of desperation?

Many, if not most, interpretations of this story talk about how Jesus has changed the rules of the rituals game, how the laws of purity are rendered obsolete by the purity of Christ whose blood atones always for our sins. But I think these interpretations overlook some really profound elements of this radical encounter with Jesus, some that have implications for our lives today. What might we learn, for example, if we looked for a moment at this woman as the criminal Jairus must have believed she was?

Jairus must have understood well that the purity laws in Leviticus have less to do with defining a rigid lifestyle for the people of Israel than they do with maintaining the holiness of the people of Israel. The holiness of the people, to be modeled on the holiness of God, was of paramount importance. So when the holiness of a member of the community is violated intentionally, it is tantamount to purposefully violating the holiness of God. Offenses against God were serious business in Israel. What this woman did, in effect, was defile God, not so much because it was Jesus she touched, but because she caused another person to become impure for her own selfish ends. In most cases, we would call this me-first

attitude a crime. We would call it a crime if a desperate woman broke into a church and stole the Sunday offering, even if it was because she had no insurance to pay for her hysterectomy. We would call it a crime if a desperate woman sold her body to a man to earn money, even if it was so she could buy food and clothing for her three hungry children. We would call it a crime if a desperate woman shot her husband, even if she did it while he was throwing her around the house because dinner was late. I believe we would call these crimes, despite the mitigating circumstances. It is true that in our own time, these examples are civil, rather than religious crimes, and do not defile God, per se, at least not in the way the Israelites understood it. But is not the theft of property proscribed by God? Is not the degradation involved in prostitution grievous to God? Is not the loss of any life keenly felt by God?

Jesus is being very confusing here. On one hand he tells us to repent, to turn away from sin and evil and come close to God, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. Then on the other he says that a crime, committed as an act of desperation, is faith that moves God to heal and save. What is he saying about faith? Are the inmates to run the prison? Is anything excusable in the name of desperation? Or is this an invitation to take a good hard look at our own views of grace and salvation in light of Jesus' declaration of this woman's faith?

I started out by saying that I have never really been desperate. I had my moments but in the long run, they were sort of petty. But I worked for a drug and alcohol rehabilitation program for many years and I've known quite a few people who have been desperate and have done things that we would call crimes, things that most of us would never dream of doing. If desperate times call for desperate measures, why then is this hemorrhaging woman called faithful for committing a crime while the rest of us just get locked up? Was she particularly attractive? Did she have a good lawyer? Or, perhaps, was it because she was desperate for God? We mustn't forget that the primary problem with impurity is that it prevented the unclean one from worshipping God in the temple. This woman, this faithful one who dared to touch Jesus' garment and inflict him with her impurity, did so in order that she could, after twelve long years, once again worship God.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. At least that's what Dietrich Bonhoeffer thought when he returned to Germany in 1933 after only a year in the United States. His story is pretty well known but I'll remind you that he was one of but a handful of Christian leaders in Nazi Germany to stand up and object to Hitler. His opposition to the Third Reich was so intense that he became involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler and, being caught, spent many years in prison, finally being hanged just days before American troops liberated his concentration camp. That God might be worshipped, truly worshipped without nationalism and hatred, hypocrisy and violence, Bonhoeffer committed a crime, as an act of

desperation, that healing and salvation might take place. Should his crime not also be called faith?

Martin Luther King, Jr. explained in his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail* his rationale for breaking the law. He put it this way: “An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority...So segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, but it is morally wrong and sinful.” King believed that segregation laws were contrary to the will of God, that segregation broke the human spirit to the point that worshipping God became difficult for all the hardships imposed by injustice. For wanting all people to have the freedom God intends, Martin Luther King, Jr. spent many a night in jail. Should his crimes not also be called faith?

In the story of her struggle to become a priest in the Episcopal Church, which did not ordain women until 1974, Carter Heyward expresses a desperation that sounds a lot like our story today. After certain bishops had ordained 11 women to the priesthood, the House of Bishops met and voted to oppose and render invalid the ordinations. Concerning the opposition they faced and the many calls to be patient, she writes this: “We could have waited -- until tomorrow; until

1976; we could have waited forever. We did not have to do it. We chose to do it. The Lord God of justice always calls people to just action now. Usually we do not respond decisively. We do not hear the call, or we do not understand it, or we do not take it seriously, or we are too busy with other priorities. Occasionally, by grace, a human being will choose to respond now.” There were many in the Episcopal Church who felt that the Reverend Carter Heyward broke the canonical laws of the church by responding now. Should her crime not also be called faith?

Desperate times call for desperate measures. The woman in our story could have waited another twelve years to stop her bleeding but that would have been another twelve years of misery. She could tolerate no longer the separation from God and community and she makes her desperate move just after Jesus has agreed to help someone else. Can we not forgive her for thinking, “Why not me? Why not now?” As with Bonhoeffer and King and Carter Heyward, it was, then, by grace, that this human being chose to respond now to the call of God to justice and wholeness and health. The miracle in this story is not that Jesus healed a hemorrhaging woman. No, the miracle in this story is that the grace of God compelled her to respond now, even if it meant breaking a sacred law. A funny thing happened on the way to the synagogue. A desperate woman took matters, quite literally, into her own hands and got away with it. An astounding thing took place on the way to the synagogue: her faith, expressed in a crime of desperation, moved God to make her well. May we all be so desperate to worship God! Amen.