

Faith Healers or Healing Faith

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Mark 5:21-43

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

“Miracles are not contrary to nature, but only contrary to what we know about nature.”

- Augustine

Thomas Jefferson was the principle architect of our Declaration of Independence. His Bill for Religious Freedom established the principle of the separation of church and state. He was also America’s third president.

On three successive evenings in February 1804, Jefferson used a razor and a jar of paste to cobble together his edited version of the four gospels. In his 46-page compendium of Jesus’ life, Jefferson eliminated all references to the virgin birth, Jesus’ divinity, his miracles and the resurrection. He completed this project in 1819 and titled it *The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. His family and friends dubbed it *The Jefferson Bible*. His work was never published. It was circulated among Jefferson’s descendents and was all but forgotten until a Smithsonian librarian discovered it in 1895.

Jefferson regarded Jesus as an incomparably great moral teacher, but not the promised Messiah. He was essentially a Deist. Jefferson believed God to be unknowable and uninvolved in human affairs. He disregarded anything Jesus did that did not square with the laws of nature.

I believe in the laws of nature. How would I recognize the aberration of the sun rising in the western sky if I didn’t know it always rises in the east?

I also believe in a realm beyond the natural world. Augustine aptly put it, “Miracles are not contrary to nature, but only contrary to what we know about nature.” The supernatural invades the natural. God, in the person of Jesus Christ, enters our world of time and space. Miracles are possible because our supernatural God exercises dominion over our natural world

We’re examining, today, two of Jesus’ miracle stories. The account of a 12-year-old daughter brought back from the dead and a woman healed from a 12-year illness. Mark is fond of telling two stories together. We observed in Mark 2 how Mark wraps a healing story around a forgiveness story (2:1-12).

The two people featured in our story couldn’t be more different. Jairus is well known and socially prominent, the leader of a local synagogue. The anonymous woman lives on society’s margins, ostracized

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from the local synagogue. Yet, both have one thing in common. They are driven to Jesus by the extremity of their need. They are both desperate for a cure.

Our story opens with Jairus begging Jesus to heal his gravely ill daughter. Jesus agrees to come to his home in the company of a large crowd. In the crowd that day is an unnamed woman, whose body has been hemorrhaging for 12 miserable years. She has tried every doctor and miracle cure known to man, but nothing has worked. Her physical ailment has left her financially destitute.

By rights, she shouldn't be there. Her bleeding renders her ceremoniously unclean (Leviticus 15:19-30). She's been labeled an "untouchable." Everything she touches is unclean. Everyone who touches her is unclean.

She could have cried out, Jesus, heal me!, but she is silenced by the anticipated rebuke from the crowd. Shame has done a number on her!

She likely knows Jesus and the crowd are headed to Jairus' house. Surely Jairus has more pressing concerns. After all, his daughter is dying. Rather than risk rebuke and shame, she decides to risk a touch, just a touch. No one will ever know. No one needs to know.

She positions herself in the crowd and, in a well-timed moment, touches the back of Jesus' robe. Just like that, her

bleeding stops. She knows instantly she has been healed.

Jesus stops the processional and says the very words she fears most. "Who touched me?" His disciples react with understandable surprise.

"Master, all these people are touching you. How can you say, who touched me?"

"No," Jesus insists, "Someone has touched me. I know it because power has gone out of me." Somehow Jesus is able to discriminate between a jostling crowd and the anxious tug of faith.

Ever want to get away? She hoped to be healed incognito, but now her cover is blown. Trembling, she steps forward and confesses, expecting condemnation. After all, condemnation is all she has known for 12 years.

"Daughter, your faith has healed you," Jesus says. She expects to be reprimanded. Instead, Jesus commends her faith. She could have remained silent and secretly relished the healing she received. But Jesus seems unwilling to let her vanish into the crowd and let her healing be their private little secret. If Jesus had not called her out, it might have taken a long time to overcome the prejudice and scorn that had built up over the years. Jesus not only healed her illness, he healed her shame.

Meanwhile, Jairus' friends—remember Jairus--bring the fateful news. "Your

Who is Jesus?

daughter is dead.” Jairus must have thought if only we had not gotten stuck in traffic my daughter would be alive today. His friends advise him not to bother Jesus any longer. Jesus overhears their conversation and says cryptically, “Do not fear; only believe.”

They arrive at Jairus’ house where the mourning has already commenced. “Why are you weeping? This child is not dead. She’s sleeping.” Yeah right, sleeping! Real funny, Jesus!

Why did he come?

Jesus orders these scoffers out of the room. Jesus takes the dead girl’s hand, a shocking gesture. Touching a dead body was considered unclean. Jesus says to her in Aramaic, “Talitha cumi,” meaning “Little girl, get up.” Immediately, she opens her eyes. Jesus orders her something to eat and everyone to keep silent about what has happened. A lot of good that will do; her transformation will be obvious to everyone.

What is our response?

We’re asking three questions of Mark’s gospel over these four months. Who is Jesus? Why did he come? What is our response? These three questions help us clarify Jesus’ identity, mission and call. Jesus’ miracles validate Jesus’ identity as the promised Messiah, the anointed one of God.

Mark Galli, in his book *Jesus Mean and Wild*, writes about a group of Laotian refugees who had been attending his Sacramento church

where Mark served as pastor. They had been attending Mark’s church and expressed interest in joining. Since they had only a rudimentary understanding of the Christian faith, Mark suggested they study the Gospel of Mark together. They happily agreed.

Mark recalls studying the miracle stories of Jesus from this section of Mark’s gospel. They examined the account of Jesus calming the storm at sea, the story that precedes today’s lesson. After they read the story, Mark asked them about the storms they were encountering in their lives. There was a puzzled look among his Laotian students, so he elaborated. “We all have storms—problems, worries, troubles, crises—this story teaches that Jesus can give us peace in the midst of storms. So what are your storms?”

Again, more puzzled silence. Finally, one man hesitantly asked, “Do you mean that Jesus actually calms the wind and sea in the middle of a storm?” Mark thought the man was finding this story incredible. He didn’t want the man to get distracted with the problem of miracles, so he said, “Yes, Jesus calmed the wind and the sea, but we shouldn’t get hung up with the details of the miracle. We should remember that Jesus can calm the storms in our lives.” Another stretch of awkward silence ensued until another one of them replied, “Well, if Jesus calmed the wind

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and the waves, he must be a powerful man!”

At this, they all nodded vigorously and chattered excitedly to one another in their Lao language. Mark writes, “Except for me, the room was full of wonder. I suddenly realized they grasped the story better than I did.”

Who is Jesus? He is the Messiah, the anointed one of God. So what is our response?

These two stories are juxtaposed for good reason. Jairus exercises faith when he begs Jesus to heal his daughter. When Jesus heals this unnamed woman, he says, “Daughter, your faith has healed you.” Faith plays a crucial role in both stories. Jesus could have healed these people without any faith on their part. But Jesus desires some measure of reciprocity here. Notice the interplay between human faith and divine power in these stories. We supply the faith and God supplies the power. Frederick Buechner writes, “Faith in God is less apt to proceed from miracles than miracles from faith in God.” Miracles don’t produce faith in the gospels. Most often, it’s the reverse. Faith produces miracles.

Mark writes, in chapter 6, “Jesus could not do any miracles in his hometown, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith” (Mark 6:5-6). If Jesus is

the Messiah, surely he has the power to do whatever he wants. But in God’s economy, there is a level of reciprocity. We supply the faith and God supplies the power.

The essence of faith is trust. You didn’t test the pew before you sat down this morning to see whether if it would support your weight. You trusted the pew to hold you. You came to church by car today. Most of us don’t know the first thing about cars, yet we inserted the key into the ignition, trusting our cars to start and transport us here. I don’t fully understand electricity either, but I don’t sit in darkness until I do. I flip on the light switch, trusting it to work.

I don’t know everything about Jesus, yet I still trust him to redeem my life. The danger is thinking we have to marshal up enormous amounts of faith for Jesus to work miracles in our lives. If only I had more faith, Jesus could do more miracles in my life. But the two people singled out in our story are not paragons of virtue. Jairus comes begging for a cure, and the anonymous woman sneaks a touch. For anyone who has ever asked for God’s intervention in your life and wondered if your faith was adequate, relax. Jesus is able to work with faith in whatever measure it appears. We supply the trust, God supplies the power.

