

Reaching for Healing
Mark 5:21-43
Sunday, June 27, 2021
By Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

Faith in Jesus' compels Jairus and the unnamed woman to seek the healing gifts of God's restoring love.

A couple of years ago our family spent a few days at Disneyworld. Our children never cease reminding us of our long list of failures as parents and taking them to Disneyworld in Florida was chief among their complaints. We tell them that it is our duty to give them plenty of topics to discuss with their therapists, so they do not waste their money.

So, we asked around. When is a good time to go to Disneyworld in July? The answer is, "There's not." We had an incredible vacation – but we had to accept that the parks would be crowded, the lines would be long, the food expensive, and the weather hot.

What you learn, however, is that the good folks at Disney have designed ways to deal with crowds. They have offer "fast passes," which are truly a gift from God – if you know how to use them. Fortunately for us, our children are all Disney fanatics and they figured out how to game the system. Armed with our Fast Passes we rarely waited long in that hot and sticky Florida weather.

Fast passes are awesome. They open doors and gates, bring relief and most importantly – air conditioning. They do not solve all the problems of the world, but they come pretty close.

They are, of course, much better than the alternative, which is time spent waiting in long lines, shuffling along with strangers who may or may not have perfected the science of personal hygiene. Crowded lines are discouraging, defeating. Americans alone spend about 37 million hours waiting in lines—and I am guessing that does not include the check out counters at Walmart.

The pandemic has made us all especially allergic to crowds and crowded lines, which probably makes Fast Passes look even better. The thought of being caught

in a line of people, shuffling slowly, unable to see more than a few inches ahead is nauseating.

Fast passes were not part of the culture of Jesus' time, though the rich seldom waited in line with the poor, and the powerful rarely came into contact with common strangers. Based on our desires to have that coveted all-access pass to the front of the line, Jesus' meanderings through the crowded pathways of Galilee may give us pause.

A few years ago, on a warm Saturday in June, I tried to navigate my way through New York City's Time Square. The sidewalks were packed ten to 15 people deep. I gave up trying to move and quickly darted down a side street.

But Jesus does not dart out of the way, nor does he try to fast track himself out of the pathways of suffering, and I believe that may be the message for the church today.

Measured by the standards of coveted all-access passes that move us to the head of the line, Jesus' meandering through the crowded byways of Galilee may feel strange to us. It makes little sense that Mark, who never has Jesus stay in place too long, would seem to slow down the action by creating a human traffic jam.

But here is Jesus, stepping off the boat, and into the crowd. Suffering lines the streets, and literally greets him at the shoreline.

This morning's scripture is what is known as an "intercalation" of stories, or a sandwiching of two intertwined episodes. These stories within a story take place as Jesus navigates his way from the shoreline of Galilee. Word about Jesus has continued to spread and by the time his little boat docks at the shore, a large crowd has gathered.

There is no Fast Pass, either. Jesus knows that he cannot go around the crowd. The only way out, as Robert Frost said, is through. So, Jesus plunges into the crowd, with its suffering, struggles, and pain. He pushes through the mishmash of people, the jumbled humanity that looks something like the crowds snaked outside Space Mountain around 11 a.m. on a Saturday morning. There is no Fast Pass through this line of suffering, seeking people of God.

Jesus is quickly confronted by Jairus, a leader in the synagogue. You can see the lines of tears on his face. He is scared and feels helpless. His beautiful daughter – his little girl, just 12 years old, is dying. He has heard of Jesus and pleads with him to come to her bedside.

“Place your hands on her so that she can be healed and live.”

Jairus’ cries out in helplessness and agony. He has kept vigil by her bedside, but nothing has changed. By all accounts Jairus has lived a good life: he is well educated, has some status in the community, and makes a comfortable living. But his little girl’s illness has flushed away all notions that he can be in control of his life. The doctors had done all the scans, all the tests, all the procedures they knew...and still she is getting no better. In fact, this 12-year-old, who was on cusp of being considered an adult, was not going to live.

Hurry, Jesus. Please. Reaching out for healing, Jairus risks being ridiculed by the crowd. He may be a powerful leader, but here he is a helpless and scared parent. Taking Jesus by the hand, Jairus begins ploughing through the crowd, his arms working like machetes, cutting through people, trying to make his way.

There are rarely fast passes through agonizing suffering.

Just weeks ago, the family of Heidi Ferrer, an acclaimed television screenwriter, discovered that to be true. Ferrer, had been suffering from the effects of Covid-19 for more than 13 months, was a well-known writer for the Dawson’s Creek television series. Though she was no longer contagious from the virus, she was suffering from many of the painful “long hauler” symptoms that about 10% of all Covid patients face. She had tried to remain optimistic and had been an early organizer of support and advocacy groups for long-haulers, but in the end, in her words, the monster won. A day after turning 51 on May 27, Heidi Ferrer took her own life. There was no fast-pass through her suffering.

Thankfully, many of the millions of people who suffer such deeply intransient pain do not make that decision. But they, too, know the consequences of chronic illness and suffering. They know there is no “fast pass” through agony.

This was on the mind of the next person to encounter Jesus. He’s following Jairus through the packed streets when suddenly someone tugs at his clothes.

Like Jairus, she is a woman of great suffering. But unlike the leader of the synagogue, she remains an anonymous woman. She has suffered for as many years as Jairus' daughter has been alive. She has spent all of her money in search of a cure and has "suffered much" under many doctors.

She is bent over with pain and had been bleeding all those years. This suffering has exacted a toll from this unnamed woman: she had spent all her money, suffering "a lot under the care of many doctors." I don't think Mark thought a lot about the Roman healthcare plan.

This is a woman who has been shoved to the margins of her community. While Jairus lives at the center of the community, this woman exists on the sidelines, marginalized by shame, embarrassed by her condition. She hides in the community, cutoff from relationship. Jairus' daughter may be dying, but this daughter of Israel has in many ways already died.

Jesus, shuffling through the crowd, is once more interrupted. He feels power surge through his body. He wants to know: who touched me?

What are we to make of these twin stories? I believe we are called to remember both the faithfulness of Jesus who stands with those who suffer and the bold faith of Jairus and the woman who risk it all to find healing.

Both the woman and Jairus reach forward in faith, and both are filled with suffering. Both reach forward and risk being seen by God. Both emerge from the crowded streets of suffering.

And both are healed by the power of touch. Both experience the wholeness God longs to offer us in Jesus Christ. That is the thing about healing: many people, one has said are healed but never cured.¹ Think of those for whom we have prayed hard – oh so hard – who despite all the advantages of medicine and treatment do not live.

Yet, we believe they have been freed from their pain, and that the God who walks the crowded pathways of suffering remained with them.

¹ Epperly, Bruce G. "Healing Marks," Energion Publications. Kindle Edition.

Likewise, some are cured, but never quite healed. They never leave the boxes of their suffering, never are freed from their afflictions. Unlike the unnamed woman, they are never restored to community.

By the end of the day, the chaos is over, and the crowds have subsided. The streets are cleared. Jairus' family gathers around their daughter, celebrating and laughing. The unnamed woman may have also returned to her home—confident that there while there is not a “fast pass” through suffering, God will be with her, and God will be with us. Amen.