

Alternative Medicine

Mark 5:21-43

By Baron Mullis

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When I was a child, I belonged to a church that was out in the country. It's not anymore, but it was then. It was before Charlotte sprawled to surround Mint Hill and all its southern suburbs and in those days, Philadelphia Presbyterian Church was something of a country church. It wasn't really a country church, its members were as likely to be professionals in the city as they were to be farmers in the country, but it still retained a little of its flavor from the years when it was the only Presbyterian church for a very long way. When I was in college, I guess it was, one of Philadelphia's more or less native sons returned home to serve as a parish associate in his retirement. Fred R. McAlister, Jr. was his name, and he had been a child at Philadelphia when his father, also Fred McAlister had been the minister there. Now in those days, Philadelphia really had been a country church...the majority of its members were from the rural farmlands that made up Mint Hill back then, including my own great grandfather who farmed a tract that is now split in two by Highway 51.

So when old Fred R. McAlister Sr. was the minister at Philadelphia, it really was a country church and like any rural congregation, its members were very much at the mercy of the scorching summer heat of North Carolina, which I now realize is balmy compared with parts of Georgia. This was in the days before farms were owned by enormous corporations that can afford to spend copious amounts of money to bring in the behemoth contraptions that roll on huge wheels over the fields of tobacco and cotton that make up the landscape that at least until the last few years, surrounded Charlotte.

In those days, the people of the church were very much tied to the land, and very much dependent upon the mercy of the weather, and God, to water the fields. So much so that a drought, which might bring for us crunchy lawns and water restrictions would mean for them economic devastation, the difference, quite literally, between farming and share-cropping. So for the farmers who owned their fields, rain was desperately needed, but only the right amount, at the right time. Too much, too little, and the crop would be ruined.

So in those days, when the dog days of summer brought only haze and not the much needed rain that would water the cotton and make it grow and provide economic sustenance for the community, quite naturally, the congregation gathered to pray for rain. Fred used to tell me about the prayer meetings for rain. He told me how they would start off with just a handful of hardscrabble farmers whose farms were located in the worst farming areas of the county, far from the old creek that ran behind the Church, and how they would gradually swell throughout the summer as others felt the desperation of wilting crops beginning to claw at their livelihood.

But, the one thing that the prayer meetings had in common, he said, whether full or empty, was that without fail, as his father worked his way through the prayers and readings of scripture, that every time, almost without exception, old Fred. R. McAlister Sr. would end the service by scolding the congregation that they had come to pray for rain, but no one carried an umbrella.

Now, I'm not sure about this, but I've thought about it, and I know where my great – granddaddy Forbis' farm was, and I know where the church is, and they are a couple, maybe three miles apart. And this was in the days when cars weren't common and even

if they were, they were tools, not the day to day conveniences that we experience today, and I suspect that if you are desperate enough for rain to walk three miles to church to pray for it, well, you just might not particularly care to carry an umbrella, if in fact, you owned one. You might just plan on walking home in the rain, giving thanks every step of the way.

I got to thinking about those stories of the prayer meetings when I read about the woman with the hemorrhage that Mark writes about. She no more wanted, or probably needed a conversation with Jesus than those farmers needed an umbrella in order to pray for rain. As I sat and thought about her story, about how she chased Jesus down, reaching out her unclean hands in the hope that her fingertips might brush the hem of his tunic, I couldn't help but see how her countenance must have fallen with the realization that she was busted. In the midst of a crowd, pressing in on all sides, Jesus whips around and asks, "Who touched me?"

What an odd question, "Who touched me?" The disciples thought so too. They stopped in their tracks, perhaps wondering if the lakeside sun had gotten to Jesus and asked him, "what are you talking about, you've got people on every side, following you, crushing in around you, and you want to know who touched you...everybody, that's who!"

Ah, but for her, the question cut deep. "Who touched me?" For her, the question shot cold fear into her heart, because for an instant she had been clean, and in an instant, she thought it was all going to be snatched back. Back to the edges, back to casting down her eyes, back to walking a few steps away from the rest of the crowd. And she had been so close. So close.

By all accounts she should have been able to slip up, do the deed, if you will, and slip away, unnoticed, insignificant, clean but safely anonymous. In fact, the story isn't really about her. Mark puts her story inside a story inside a story. Her story is embedded within the story of Jairus the Synagogue leader and his sick daughter. And Jairus' story is within the story of Jesus coming back from across the sea of Galilee.

It is really fascinating, when you take a moment to put the story within the larger story... In the larger story of Mark's Gospel account, Jesus started his ministry in Galilee, spent some time in the countryside there, wandering around with his group of followers he called away from their jobs as laborers, good Jewish men, all of them. Then he took them on a day trip across the Sea of Galilee. It doesn't sound like much, particularly since the Sea of Galilee isn't so big, isn't so wide where they crossed, but when they got to the other side, Jesus cast all caution to the wind and went on what looks like a campaign to ritually defile himself. In his first steps onto the foreign soil on the other side, where the Gentiles lived, he quickly ended up in a graveyard (unclean because dead people were disposed of there) talking with a demon possessed man (unclean for the obvious reasons of demon possession) and after a brief interlude he sent the aforementioned demons into a herd of ritually forbidden pigs that rushed down the embankment into the sea and drowned. The unfortunately drowning of all that livestock may have slightly redeemed the situation for what I can only assume were some seriously skittish disciples given that the pigs were themselves unclean, and finally, much to their great relief, Jesus sailed back across the Sea of Galilee into familiar, comfortable, clean Jewish territory. And if I had to venture a guess, he was probably just ahead of the infuriated owners of the pigs who were not so concerned about their ritual uncleanness

and probably greatly concerned about the destruction of property. An moment that must have salved the disciples' panic stricken souls; Jesus is about to do a mitzvah, a favor for Jairus, the leader of the synagogue in saving his stricken daughter from certain death. Maybe, just maybe they can sort of gloss over that unfortunate incident on the other side. This is the scene of this story within a story within a story.

She no more wanted, or probably needed a conversation with Jesus than those farmers needed an umbrella to pray for rain. The Bible tells us that she had already spent all her money on physicians. She had exhausted her options. Like the farmers who bore the heat of the day and stumbled to church to pray for what they most needed, she dragged her tired, sick, unclean self out of bed to wander after Jesus because her options had run out.

We could try to make this a story about a pious, prayerful woman who sought in faith to find the Lord, but we wouldn't be very faithful to the text if we did so. Mark is clear that this is a woman at her wits end, at least at her financial end, who didn't know Jesus, didn't much care whether she met him, wanted him pretty much only for the power she thought resided in the hem of his garments.

What a strange interlude, this story about how Jesus came back across the Sea of Galilee and was going to do something respectable like heal the synagogue leader's daughter, and got stopped by a strange, unclean woman.

Have you ever noticed how often Jesus had strange women chasing after him? Have you ever noticed how often Jesus seems to be preoccupied with the insane and the unwell and the unclean and the sexually suspect, from the prostitutes to the IRS agents to the dead. Every time he seems to be about to go and do something that might seem, well, on an

admitted strange continuum, to be *normal*, he gets dragged back to reality by the needs of someone who, well, *needed* him.

Have you ever noticed how often Jesus got sidetracked by the people who needed him?

And have you ever noticed how Jesus always managed to find a way to be with them all?

It wasn't that Jairus' daughter wasn't important. She was. She mattered. Jesus made his way to her bedside, staring down the mockers and naysayers all the way, and raised her up. Then, in moment of sheer practicality, he had them get her something to eat. It

wasn't that Jesus didn't want to heal her too, respectable daughter of the respectable elder, it's just that he wasn't *not* going to stop and *be* with the woman who needed him.

Shortly after I was ordained, a minister friend of mine told me that one thing he always did at a bedside in the hospital was to just *touch* the person who was there...perhaps just a hand on the shoulder, or if they were close, a clasp of the hand, because in touching the person, he acknowledged that they were there, that they mattered, that they weren't *untouchable*. Sometimes people don't want to touch a sick person, they're afraid they'll catch "it".

But then my friend also took it a step further. He said, always touch the body when there has been a death, so that the family knows that even in death, they are still loved, still able to be touched, and cared for, and he said, even at the graveside, as you prepare to lower the casket into the earth, reach out and touch the coffin so that the family remembers that this is someone they cared for and physically, really, lovingly, touched and were touched by.

Unclean persons were – are – cut off from all that. They aren't a part of the group. They aren't the ones that get their hands shaken or crushed into a bear hug at the party. They

are the ones that don't merit touch. They are the ones that everyone brushes past, scrupulously avoiding contact lest they be entrapped, lest they catch "it." This is who touched Jesus on his way to heal Jairus' daughter...

It makes me wonder if *faith* is less important in this story than *hope*? I wonder if what Jesus felt wasn't so much the brush of fingertips against the fabric of his clothes as the hope that dared approach? Faith is sometimes harder to muster than hope.

In the sixth century, a Byzantine deacon named Romanos set this story in a poetic form to be sung as a sermon. He wrote:

"Now thou didst walk upon the earth with feet of incorruption,

dispensing healing to all;

for thou didst give sight to the blind,

muscular control to the weakened

By the touch of thy hand, and a word, by Thy will alone;

And this the woman with the issue of blood had heard.

She came to Thee to be saved, silent in speech,

But crying out earnestly with her hand:

"Savior, save me."¹

At the close of each stanza, the woman, nameless still, replies: *savior, save me*.

I wonder if it is less a story about faith than it is about hope. Hope...that I will reach him. Hope...that I can touch his garment. Hope...that I will be made well.

Atwan, Robert, George Dardess and Peggy Rosenthal, eds. Divine Inspiration: the Life of Jesus in World Poetry. New York, Oxford University Press, 1998. p139

I wonder if the prayer meetings for rain were less about the sure faith that God would act than the hope that God could.

I wonder if hope comes first, and faith later.

Of course, for us, in the end the story is a story about healing. In the end it is a story about a woman who dared to approach the throne of grace with boldness. In the end it is a story of a woman who exhibited the faith of the outcast that God can **do something about it!**

We've all had moments when all that was left was a shred of hope that God can do something about it, whatever *it* is. The longer I minister, the more I see, the more I believe that faith is born out of that hope.

If you have ever prayed for rain, you know what it is to hope that God can do something about it. If you have ever lingered at the bedside, you know what it is to hope that God can do something about it. If you have ever clung to a marriage that seemed over, you know what it is to hope that God can do something about it.

Faith has to have a starting place. Sometimes belief just isn't innate and doubts arise that may leave us wondering if we will ever be able to believe again. It happens to even the most seasoned Christians. And I don't know if we think it is magic or the promise of the Gospel or what exactly, but there seems to be something about hoping that it can all be true that seems enough to start with, enough to hold on to.

But you already knew that. You already knew that if you can just reach the hem of his garment...

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.