



Grace in Desperation

Matthew 9:14-26

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

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We have been looking each week at some of the places in the Biblical witness of God's love that the grace of God is made palpably known. Whether it be the protection and assurance of God in a dangerous place, or if it be God's steadfastness through a season of hardship, no matter the person or the place, in a foreign land or in the homeland, for those who are outcast and those who are in the king's high court, no matter your status among the people, or even if you have been run out of town, God's grace is there to ensure you always know you are cared for by God's love. Our text today provides not one, but two more examples of God's *Replicated Grace*, in an account of Christ's life that continues to push our understanding of just how far God is willing to go that we may encounter the overwhelming power of God's love.

The story line, beginning in verse 10, puts Jesus in the house of Matthew, the tax collector. The narrative has not offered that Jesus has left. So, when our text today begins with an account of the disciples of John the Baptist coming to Jesus to question the practice of fasting – or the lack thereof – among his own disciples, we can assume this is taking place at Matthew's house. John the Baptist was Jesus's cousin, and had come to prepare the way for Christ. He taught his disciples about the Messiah to come, and had tried to prepare them to welcome Jesus as Savior. Much like the Pharisees and temple leaders themselves, the disciples of John came and questioned Jesus, inquiring as to the seeming lack of commitment to the religiosity they expected from the disciples of the man who was the supposed Savior and Messiah.

Jesus isn't one to criticize fasting; he has in other places condoned the act. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus even gives instructions on how to fast properly. However, his response here seems a bit contentious as his response falls in line with the majority of his teachings – it pushes back on those asking the question and is offered in a rather cryptic manner. Jesus talks about how new cloth, that which has not yet shrunk, can't be sewed on to old already shrunk cloth as a patch or it will only make the hole bigger. And he says that new wine can't be poured in old wine skins or it could ruin both the wineskins and the wine. New wine must only be put in new wine skins. While definitely a bit ambiguous in nature, what Christ seems to be saying is that we can't expect the new things God is doing to fit into the old paradigm.

Jesus doesn't further engage with John's disciples, nor does he further clarify what it is he's trying to teach them. Instead of verbally clarifying what he's trying to teach them, Jesus is going to demonstrate his point.

While he was still teaching these things, a leader came up to him and knelt before him. Imagine if you will the thoughts of this leader, who presents himself as the father of daughter who has died ...

“My daughter has died! Oh God, why must you take my child from me? What has she done – what have I done to deserve such punishment? [Walking aimlessly with hand on forehead, mumbling to self.]

“I know what I must do. I’ve heard of this rabbi who is in town who is a miracle worker. I’ve heard he has made the blind to see and the lame to walk. I will go to him, and he will come and bring my daughter back to life. [Turning as if listening to his wife ...] What honey?

“I know, I know. Going to him could put in jeopardy my position as a temple leader, but he’s our only hope. I don’t care what the others will say; they can run me out of the temple for all I care. I’d rather be without a job and broke than to lose her. If he is who he says he is, he’s our only hope.”

It should be noted here that nearly half of all children in the days of Jesus died before the age of 5. This girl’s death should not have come as a surprise to this man, it was literally a coin flip whether she would live to see an older age. What’s perhaps more interesting about this text is the man’s willingness to go against his own societal stature for the outside chance of healing his daughter. *His daughter*. Today, for a daughter or a son, people are willing to great lengths to protect and save their children – sons and daughters. But 2000 years ago, little girls were seemingly inconsequential for society. They were just one rung from the bottom of the social ladder – sitting in importance just above slaves.ⁱ His dire attempt to save his daughter was not only out of the ordinary and risky to his own position as a leader in the synagogue, it was also a risky invitation for Jesus. Let’s turn to him again ...

“How do I convince him to come? No one cares about our little girls, and she’s already dead. Why would he come? It’s not like I’ve been a best friend to the rabbi either. I have been there among the leaders who have tried to prove him a blasphemous heretic. But he’s our only hope, I must go to him.

“I just don’t know; how do I convince him to come? If he comes and touches her, he’ll face the same fate as I. The Word has said, that if a person touches the corpse of a dead body, they shall be considered unclean and could be cut off from all of Israel.ⁱⁱ Is saving my daughter worth the possible judgment of this man? Is my life, is his life, worth sacrificing for the life of my baby girl?

“Yet, I must go. If not I, who will be her advocate? If not I, who will go on her behalf? If not I, she will surely never rise.”

Reaching Jesus, who is still talking to the disciples of John about the wineskins and cloth, this leader kneels before him. This leader of the synagogue takes the position of one humbling himself in the house of a tax collector. He goes where no temple leader would dare go and strikes a pose of humility very few temple leaders would take, and he says, “Sir, my daughter has died; but I trust in your power – you alone can save her. Please, come lay a hand on her, and I know she will live.”

Jesus doesn't ask questions. Jesus doesn't put up a rebuttal. Jesus doesn't call into question the man's motives. Jesus simply gets up and follows the man, calling his disciples to follow him. We don't know how far the walk is from Matthew's house to the leader's house. We can consider that no matter the distance, they all walked quickly on their way to find the girl, who is said to be lying dead in the house.

As they are walking, Jesus encounters a woman, known to us only as the woman who had been hemorrhaging blood for nearly 12 years. We do not know the age of the woman, just that she has been dealing with this affliction for a long while. It is speculated, though we have no evidence to support or deny the claim, that her non-stop bleeding is in connection to a medical problem that causes her menstrual cycle to never cease. The cause of her bleeding *is important* because the type of bleeding she experiences will determine how the community treats her. It also gives us an idea of her age. If this is as suspected, a complication of a regular feminine cycle, we can imagine this is no young girl. This could at minimum be a young woman, but could be of any age up to the elderly.

Regardless of age, according to Jewish law as recorded in Leviticus, "When a woman has a discharge of blood that is her regular cycle from her body, she shall be unclean for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until nightfall comes. ... If, however, she continues to bleed beyond her regular cycle, she shall be considered unclean for all the days she bleeds. ... Everything on which she sits shall be considered unclean; every bed on which she lies shall be considered unclean; anyone who touches her or any of these things she has touched will be considered unclean until they go through the proper cleansing."ⁱⁱⁱ

Imagine with me, if you will, the struggle this woman has been dealing with for over a decade ...

"Should I touch him? The pain of stretching. Pushing my way through. Touching. Touching just his dangling tassel. No one will know. No one needs to know. No one knows. No one knows what it's like to be me. No one knows what I've been through. No one knows the shame. It's the blood. Not like the rest. Not every month or so. All the time. All the time! And you know what that means! Yes, it means unclean, unclean. No big deal if it's just once a month for a few days. That passes. But I'm different. I am the difference walking around; walking around bloody, unclean, unclean! I am womanhood all wrapped up into a few days and then smeared over the entire calendar. No room. No room for us at the temple. Well, at least, not on the inside. Always on the outside. The outside!

"There are reasons, they tell me. There are reasons! Of course there are reasons! There are always reasons! God's reasons. Go on, tell me. It is written.... Do you think I don't know? Do you think my father didn't tell me? Do you think my mother left me to grow up without knowing such things? You tell me to pray? Of course I pray. I pray! I cry! They don't hear me! I get sick of those washings. I wash and wash, but I'm never clean.

“Touch him? Touch his tassel. What if he found out? What if he knew? Is he psychic? There's something there. It makes me want to do it - go on, dare! What if he reacts like he did when that leper charged through the crowd and wanted attention? But at least he relented. Perhaps I can persuade him. Perhaps I could explain. Perhaps I could push him. Perhaps I should argue with him. What if he calls me a dog, too, like he did that Gentile mum who wanted help for her daughter? But she got through to him. She won him over. That's the trouble with these religious men. They're too bent on keeping it all within bounds, everything in its place, everything in order, nothing upsetting, maintaining the old prejudices and exclusive systems and scared to drop their guard. Look at him. Do you really think he's any different? Look at those tassels!

“Touch his tassel! Touch his tassel. Push through reach out, get in close behind and touch his tassel, just lightly, just enough; no one will see. Here I go, get out of the road, yes I've made it, got it; no I didn't pull it; just touched it. No one saw me. It was like I was reaching out for my life, like I'd touched the curtain, just enough to let God know I was there.”^{iv}

But Jesus knew. Jesus knew not only what she had done, but he knew why. And turning to her, he offers these healing words, “θυγάτηρ θαρσέω (*thyguhtēr tharseō*)” *Take heart, daughter.*

Don't miss the meaningful connection Jesus has just made here. When the leader came to Jesus asking him to heal his baby girl, the words the father used were, “ἐγὼ θυγάτηρ ἄρτι τελευτάω (*egō thyguhtēr arti teleutaō*).” *My daughter has died.*

The man in seeking healing asked for help for his *daughter*, and Jesus, in healing the woman who touched his tassel, calls her *daughter*. Both use the same the word, θυγάτηρ (*thyguhtēr*).

“Along with Jesus, this passage provides us with an unlikely hero and an unforgettable heroine; the synagogue leader who humbles himself and the unwanted woman who has the moxie to grab hold of Jesus' cloak. They come from different places and for different reasons. One is at the top of the social ladder; the other has been left off entirely. One has an urgent and dire need; the other has a chronic and more complicated condition. Both have faith. Both, regardless of sinful status or personal circumstance receive attention from Jesus and a miraculous result. Jesus reminds us of their equal value when he turns to the woman and calls her "daughter," the term the man uses when referring to his own little girl. All are children of God, and it is to those of us in need that Jesus has come.”^v

Jesus is a miracle worker – the father and the woman both know this. But more than a miracle worker, we see here the message God is speaking through Christ. In response to the disciples of John, Christ offers that we cannot expect God to work in the same way today as God has always worked before. You cannot put new wine in old wine cloths. For all that we have done right in the world, the church is not innocent of failing to keep up with ever changing work of God in the word. We cannot expect that God will only work today in the same places, or through the same people, or in the same ways God has worked before. And so, we must then consider, "Might it be that at the heart of these two mutually interpreting stories is Jesus' promise that,

whatever our outward similarities and differences, to God we are all beloved children? That we are all therefore worthy of dignity and honor? That God loves each and all of us the same?"^{vi}

We believe God is love, and we're making a place for everyone to know that love. We're not doing this because we know we have all the right answers and we have all the right methods, we are making a place for everyone because we know that Christ was willing to go anywhere and to visit anyone and to use all methods necessary to share the great grace of God with others. For if there is anything we have been taught by the Holy Word, it's that no one in our community, no one in our country, and no one in our world is beyond the reach of God's great love and mercy.

And don't just think this text refers to people beyond these walls. The actions and teaching of Christ offer that there is no one even in this room who is not worthy of God's great love.

And so, as this season of Lent begins to wind down, as we have but one week until Holy Week, I invite you today to hear this good news taught and demonstrated by Christ – God does not see as the world sees. It matters not how unimportant you may be to the world around you. It matters not how unwelcomed one may be to the world around them. Christ comes to offer restoration, reconciliation, and new life to each and all of God's created. May you receive the grace of restoration in your desperation, and may you extend God's great grace of reconciliation to all who have been outcast, lost, and left out. That together, united in Christ, in holy and beloved community, we may all encounter and know the great love of God. Amen.

ⁱ Douglas R. A. Hare. *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Matthew*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

ⁱⁱ Numbers 19:11-13. NRSV.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leviticus 15:19-30

^{iv} William Loader. Excerpts from: "Should I Touch Him?" <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/Tassels.html>. Retrieved March 29, 2017.

^v Alexander Wimberly. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word; Year A, Volume 3*. Eds. David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

^{vi} David Lose. davidlose.net. Retrieved March 29, 2017.