

# **Sermon, 30-Dec-2012**

## **Bethel Christian Fellowship, Fair Lawn, NJ -- 10.00 am**

[Martin Luther said, "The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold on me." Prayer for guidance of the Holy Spirit.]

### **Matt. 9:18-26**

18 While he was saying these things to them, behold, a ruler came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." 19 And Jesus rose and followed him, with his disciples.

20 And behold, a woman who had suffered from a discharge of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, 21 for she said to herself, "If I only touch his garment, I will be made well." 22 Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well.

23 And when Jesus came to the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, 24 he said, "Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. 25 But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose. 26 And the report of this went through all that district.

### **Introduction**

It is good to be with you again. It is always a blessing to me to be reminded so forcefully of the bonds we have developed in Christ over the years.

In our passage this morning we are continuing a journey in the gospel of Matthew, starting at the beginning of chapter 8, which we began together as long ago as 2006. The last time I spoke to you, we looked together at Matthew 9:14-17. In that passage the disciples of John the Baptizer came to ask Jesus why it was that, unlike other pious Jews at that time, Jesus' disciples did not fast.

Do you remember how Jesus answers them? He says two things. First, he says that the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken away, and then the disciples will fast. When we looked at this passage together last year, we noted that this "bridegroom" language links back to Old Testament passages which refer to the coming Messiah as the bridegroom of his people. In the context in which he spoke to John's disciples, he was still with them and with his own disciples, so joy in his presence was appropriate. But after his death, then there would be a time for sadness and mourning.

The second thing Jesus does is to make two brief parabolic comments, one about not sewing new cloth as patches on old garments and the second about not putting new wine into old wineskins.

The point of that passage was to emphasize to John's disciples, and to us, that now the Messiah has come. When the Messiah is present, you experience joy. And his new kingdom is not going to be like the old kingdom. You cannot pour his new life into old forms of religion, which are brittle and purely formal.

Then we come to this morning's passage, verses 18-26. When you look at this passage, you will see that it naturally divides into three sections -- two outer sections surrounding a different story in the center. The opening outer section tells of a prosperous ruler with a desperate request. The closing outer section gives the conclusion to the story of the ruler and his daughter. It tells of the gentle hand of Jesus. And in the center, between these two sections, is the interruption caused by an outcast woman.

### **a prosperous ruler**

Matthew introduces our passage with the phrase "while he [Jesus] was saying this." When you see a phrase like that, you should stop to ask yourself, while he was saying *what*? Well, when he was saying what we just looked at in the previous verses, vv. 14-17.

So when Matthew begins our text this morning by saying "while he was saying this," Matthew wants us to remember what he has just said. He wants us to recall this joy at the presence of the bridegroom, and he wants us to reflect on how this new wine is going to overflow old expectations about how God demonstrates and gives his grace.

For isn't that exactly what the ruler who now comes before Jesus must have been hoping and praying for? What do we know about this ruler? Well, if you compare the parallel accounts in Mark and Luke, you will learn that he is the ruler of the synagogue in Capernaum, and that his name is Jairus. So he would have been prosperous and well regarded; he was in the inner circle of those who had authority in Judaism. And he had a daughter who was twelve years old. From the accounts in Mark and Luke we learn that she was dying when he set out to meet Jesus; from Matthew we learn that she already was dead by the time he kneels before Jesus.

She is dying, already as good as dead. Yet nevertheless he comes and kneels before Jesus. What is he doing? The word translated "kneel" carries the connotation of acknowledging that the one before whom one is worshiping is a god. Since this is a faithful Jew, for him to take this position means he cannot be worshiping just any old so-called "god." No, he is worshiping before the only true God, before God himself. He is in desperate need, yes, but he believes that he is in the presence of one worthy of worship, and so he comes to lay his pain before Jesus.

Before we move on, let me just apply his attitude to us, to you and me, for a second. How do we come before our Lord, not only on Sunday morning, but also in our moments of looking towards

him in dependence? Here is what happens to me sometimes. I get into a rut, and I do what I've programmed myself to do. Maybe that is doing my daily Bible reading. Maybe it is Sunday morning, so I'm programmed to get up, get dressed, go to church, blah blah blah. Do you have days like that? We call what we do on Sunday morning "worship," but on blah blah blah days, I'm not at all sure that I'm breaking into joyful praise of Jesus. No, with sadness I confess that sometimes when I come on Sunday morning, or when I open my Bible, I'm just ... blah blah blah.

Now that is what this ruler is NOT. He is NOT blah blah blah. He is desperate, and he has heard about Jesus, he knows Jesus is who he desperately needs, and so he comes to Jesus and he kneels before him, he worships him.

In his worship of Jesus, he begs Jesus to come to lay his hand on his daughter. Why? What is he thinking? I think it is worth pausing for a moment to ask this. It is possible to get caught up in the things which follow, and fail to ask oneself, what does this ruler think is going to happen when he tells Jesus, "my daughter is dead," and begs Jesus to come and touch her.

Well, perhaps we may learn something from the fact that Matthew has just told us about new garments and new wineskins: Matthew is telling us to expect something something extraordinary. So the ruler is hoping for something that will show God's grace breaking all the bounds of what had ever been seen before. He knows who Jesus is, and of this he is certain: if Jesus lays his hand on the girl, she will live. In Greek, as in English, the word for "live" can mean what we would call "physical" life but can also refer to the real life which is eternal. We shall see in a moment that for Matthew this ambiguity is deliberate.

In any case, confronted by the ruler's faith, Jesus followed him, as did the disciples.

### **an outcast woman**

Along the way there is an encounter with a woman who has been hemorrhaging blood for 12 years. I am sure that it is not a "coincidence" (as if in God's providence there were any such thing) that the ruler's daughter is twelve years old and that this woman has had her disease for twelve years. The ruler and his family have had twelve years of happiness; this woman has had twelve years of misery. Now the ruler and this woman are joined by their need for Jesus.

Her misery would have had at least three dimensions. First, of course, would have been her illness. She had been ill for twelve years, so it was not fatal, at least not yet. Nevertheless, a condition like that would leave a person debilitated and in pain. Second, Luke tells us that this woman had spent all her money on doctors but had not found healing. So she would have had severe problems with money. Finally, she would have been a social outcast. In the Old Testament, women having a discharge of blood were unclean (Lev. 15:25), and men were forbidden to have sexual relations with such women (Lev. 18:19). The upshot was that she could not be married, and she was always unclean, so no one would approach her.

So she is desperate, just as the ruler is desperate. But unlike the ruler, she does not approach Jesus directly, but rather sneaks up to him in the crowd in order to touch the tassels of his shawl, believing that if she did this, she would be made well.

Jesus turns, knowing what has happened, and sees her. What does he see? He sees the same thing he saw earlier in chapter 9, when some people brought a paralytic lying on a bed to him. Matthew tells us that “when Jesus *saw* their faith,” he healed the paralytic (9:2). You and I cannot see faith. And don’t we sometimes feel shaky in our own faith? Don’t we recognize how imperfect it is? But Jesus sees right into our souls; he sees our faith.

So Jesus looks at this outcast woman and sees a person, a daughter, who has shown faith in him, in who and what he is. It is true that her faith is, as Calvin says, mixed with all kinds of error. Let me emphasize that this passage does not teach that we should go on pilgrimages to touch fragments of the true cross or the shroud of Turin or the like. Rather, this passage testifies to her faith, and to Christ’s power. For, as Calvin goes on to say, Christ does not criticize her; instead, he graciously accepts her imperfect, weak faith [as cited by Luz, 2:42].

“Your faith has made you well.” Her illness was beyond the scope of any medical knowledge of that time. But at Jesus’ command, she was immediately healed. Again, Matthew has shown, as he has done throughout chapters 8 and 9, that Jesus has healed every kind of disease and affliction. He has complete command over the physical universe.

But there is more here. A minute ago I mentioned that Matthew seems to be using the word “life” in an ambiguous way -- to mean both physical life, but also eternal life. And so here; for the Greek word translated “well” in verses 21 and 22 is *sozo*, which also has a range of meaning. It does mean “well,” as in being in a state of health. But it also has the meaning of “saved,” “salvation.” Matthew is deliberately using a word which both means “restored to health” but also “restored to a right relationship with God.”

When she demonstrated her faith, however imperfect, by touching the tassels of Jesus’ cloak, Jesus rewarded her faith by instantly both restoring her health and also assuring her that she was in a right relationship with him, and if with him then with the God of the universe. It is only God who has complete control over the physical universe, but it is even more so only God who can pronounce our salvation.

### **a gentle hand**

At last Jesus and his party came to the ruler’s house. When they arrived, they encountered flute players and a crowd making a commotion. The flute players were probably professional mourners, and the crowd would have been the neighbors, wailing at the sudden death of the girl. Jesus said to them, “Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping” (v. 24).

How does the crowd respond? They laughed at him.

Some commentators think that the professional mourners were being mocking Jesus. Calvin, for example, chastises them: they would have known who Jesus was, and how he had been healing every sickness and infirmity, so they should have known better.

This is true. But perhaps they were thinking about what they had seen inside the house -- we know they had been inside, because Jesus had them forced outside. And while they were inside, they would have seen the girl. And she was dead.

Even in the classical world, the world of Greece and Rome, the world of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra and Augustus Caesar, the world of first century Palestine, everyone knew that when you died, you were dead. It isn't as if we just discovered this in the twenty-first century. No, the people in the classical world knew just as well as we do that when you die, you are dead.

And these were professional mourners. They knew death -- this was their trade, after all! She was dead, and dead is dead.

So what did Jesus mean when he said, "she is not dead, she is sleeping"? Did he mean this literally, that she really was asleep, but only he was able to tell that, and everyone else had mistaken her condition? This cannot be the explanation, for Matthew already has told us that she was dead. So what he must be saying is that he is about to show that death in some sense is a condition like sleep. He is about to give Matthew's readers, and us, an important lesson about what death means.

After Jesus forces the mourners outside, he goes in and takes the girl's hand. This is not the first time in chapters 8 and 9 that he has reached out his hand. We saw him do this when he healed the leper, right at the beginning of chapter 8 in verse 3: "And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him [the leper], saying, 'I will; be clean.' And immediately his leprosy was cleansed."

And again, in verses 14 and 15 of the same chapter, Peter's mother-in-law was lying sick with a fever. Jesus "touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she rose and began to serve him."

Does this mean that to be healed you had to be touched by Jesus? Of course not; we know from many other healing stories that he healed in many ways, not just by touching. But, as one commentator puts it, "Jesus' hand has become a symbolic word for his helping power" [Ulrich Luz, *Matthew* (Hermeneia), 2:41].

What happens when Jesus touches her, when he exercises this helping power? She gets up.

How do you respond to this? Let me confess that sometimes I only listen in a superficial way to what is said in the gospels. Sometimes I find myself not so much denying that something has happened as thinking, well gosh that was a long time ago. That must have been something to see, but it doesn't apply to me. Ho hum. Perhaps we should call this "numbness." Ho hum, I am numb.

But what would Matthew's readers have heard? Listen! Wake up! What just happened? The girl was dead! Jesus took her hand, and she got up! Everyone knew about it! The word spread like wildfire -- the news spread throughout the district, no one could stop talking about it. Hey, Jairus' daughter was dead, the mourners were doing a great job at wailing, but that guy Jesus came by, and now she's walking around eating breakfast!

My friends, this is not a story about which we should be numb. We should be astounded, we should be amazed. Jesus just displayed the power to give life after death. Let me say that once again: he gave life after death. This is not only physical life for which we depend, day by day, moment by moment, on God's hand upholding us, but also life eternal, life in his presence. And he continues to display that power and give that life to all who believe in him, who have faith in him.

### **application**

Recently we have been reminded again of how short and uncertain life is by the terrible slaughter of innocents in Newtown, CT. We live in a world which is dreadfully fallen, in which men plot evil against each other, as the Psalmist so frequently cries out. Nor are we free ourselves from that fallenness. I, too, think and say and do things which cause harm to others, things which do not show that I follow Christ.

But what Matthew has been teaching us throughout chapters 8 and 9 is that this awful situation is not the status quo. We are not locked forever in this wheel of evil and remorse. Rather, God has burst into the world -- for Emmanuel has come, God is indeed with us.

Matthew is calling his readers to have faith in Jesus. Perhaps we do not see him walking down a street with a crowd around him, so we can press close to him hoping to touch the tassel of his garment. But in a very real sense, he is present with us this morning, in this very fellowship. The love he gave these two daughters is just as real and available to us today as it was available to them 2,000 years ago.

But we must answer the call to faith which Matthew presents to us in this story. We cannot be passive. And this call to faith is a call to continuing faithfulness. I cannot be content that once upon a time I believed in Jesus and his power to save. I must be committed to trust him constantly, to come to him with my needs at all times, from hour to hour, right this minute. And you also, my friends -- you also must believe that he can save and that he can heal and that he loves you, and you must commit yourself to his care each day and each hour.

When I was being treated for cancer a few years ago, my world shrank down to a tiny circle. I recall two things about that time: I felt awful, and I had no idea whether I was still going to be alive in a few months. It was a dark, dark time. And I remember this: my faith in Jesus as my savior required active work. I couldn't just coast. I had to very actively come to Jesus and say, my Lord, if it is your will, please help me through this time, but whatever your will, I trust you.

Now in my case, God has been gracious, as you know. Does this mean God will always heal, will always cure the terrible problems we face? The Bible nowhere promises that. So I do not expect to see frequent overt miracles, although I know that God can and does work in ways which seem mysterious to us. But this I know: Jesus' love is available to all of us today. When we trust him, depend on him, believe in him, he heals and reconciles us, just as he did those two daughters. He, and he alone, gives us real life.

I hope I am not numb in the face of these things -- I hope you are not numb. Because it is in this knowledge that we find real joy in the presence of the bridegroom. What is the chief end of man? It is to glorify God, and enjoy him forever. Let us go forth into this week, and into this new year, experience the joy of his love and his life.

Amen.

## Discussion questions: Matt. 9:18-26

What does kneeling before Jesus imply? To whom did you kneel down in the ancient world? What is the implication of the fact that the Greek word used by Matthew (a form of the verb *proskyneō*) has the connotation of “kneel down in worship to deity”?

Compare this account with the healing of the centurion’s servant in Matt. 8:5-13. How is it similar? How is it different? What did the centurion expect Jesus to do? What did the ruler expect Jesus to do?

Read Lev. 15:25 and 18:19. Why would it have been difficult for the woman with the sustained hemorrhage to marry or to remain married if she already had been married when her illness began? Why would this most likely have been a problem for her?

Matthew’s account of this incident is shorter than the parallel accounts in Mark 5:21-43 and Luke 8:40-56. For example, he omits something that Luke tells us in 8:55, a detail which I wove into the sermon with a bit of embroidery. What is this detail? Why does Luke mention this detail?

Why were miracles so common and obvious when Jesus was walking in Palestine, and yet seem less obvious today, requiring the eyes of faith to discern? How does Matt. 9:14-17 help us understand?