

## The Courage to Ask

*B Pentecost 4--Mark 5:21-43*

*Note: This sermon is meant for two readers, a man and a woman, taking turns as indicated by the placement of their lines moving down the page. They do not "play" the characters so much as narrate their stories. When the rhythm of traded lines gets close and tight, I moved the Jairus narrator's lines to the right so it's easier to see the order of lines. **Lines that are in bold font are to be read simultaneously.***

| <b>Jairus Narration</b>   | <b>Hemorrhaging Woman Narration</b>   |
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| <p>To begin with there were the other synagogue leaders.</p> <p>What would they say? Especially Baruch and that insufferable Azaziah, who was always shuffling around in his fine robes, whispering about everybody behind his back.</p> <p>And then there were the synagogue members who weren't leaders yet, but wanted to be. Boaz, for example. He had always struck Jairus as a young man with too much to prove. Hot-headed and flashy and always ordering the herders to stay out of his path and to bow when they spoke to him.</p> | <p>To begin with there were those twelve years.</p> <p>Twelve years was a long time for her to be prodded and manhandled and exorcised by every traveling physician between Jerusalem and Sidon. To be given foul powders to swallow in water, to be slathered with goat dung and stinging-nettle pastes, to be chanted over by bored and sweaty apprentices.</p> <p>Twelve years was a long time to be cursed by her father, who'd been unable to marry her off, had spent every last penny of her dowry on the doctors, and had finally built her a separate hut on his compound, by the toilet. "Where you belong," he had told her. She nodded. "Every night I ask God what I did that he should curse me this way?" She nodded again. She kept her head down. She knew he was right. She did not know, either, why</p> |

Yes, Boaz would be angling for a spot on the synagogue council. Between Boaz and Azariah there would be trouble.

Jairus could already imagine the sudden quiet that would fall in the marketplace stalls when he entered them, the reluctant and cagey greetings, the furtive looks shot across the synagogue during prayers, the whispered conversations among groups of men in the town square: "There goes Jairus, who asked help from that traveling rabbi. You know the one, the Galilean from Nazareth, the strange faith-healer who breaks all the rules?" "I heard he isn't even a proper rabbi, just a peasant with pretensions." "Say, Jairus is still on synagogue council, isn't he?" "For the time being..."

Yes there was a lot to lose, and Jairus could very well lose it. He was now among the first to be called out to hear legal disputes at the town gate. His knowledge of the five books of Moses was second to none. He had been asked, on more than one occasion, to take the place of honor at town weddings. He was steady and thoughtful and had done much to prevent rioting and theft during the famine four years before. But he knew how fast the agendas of some and the prejudices of others could be lined up against any man, especially a synagogue elder. He knew that the respect he

she'd been made into a curse upon her family.

Hemorrhaging they called it, this constant trickle down her legs that made her smell like saltwater and iron. For twelve years the dull ache of it between her hips did not seem like punishment enough for what it had cost them all.

Then there was everything the blood meant when she did go out. The five-foot space it carved around her which parted people like waters, as clear as if a sign were hung around her neck saying, "Unclean!" Not being touched or spoken too did not trouble her that much any more, truth be told, not as much as you might think. Neither did childlessness. Strange as it may seem, she had never been one with a great urge for babies.

enjoyed rested on the stability, the steady changeless traditions, which he stewarded. And all this could fly apart like chaff in the wind if he went to the rabbi from Nazareth and asked him for help.

And just when Jairus had determined that it was too much to risk--his honor, the way people looked to him for decisions, the fragile network of associations that kept his family fed and clothed--he would find himself in the corner of his home where her pallet lay. His only daughter, her breath rasping from the bag of ribs and skin that was her chest, her eye sockets dark as if the eyes themselves were receding into some internal night.

He was not supposed to love her so much. She was only a girl, a dowry on legs, as the men said. But he could not help himself. So beautiful, with her mother's plump lips and his thick hair, with her insatiable curiosity and fierce, dreamy way of moving through the world.

No, the hardest thing to get used to, the thing that still left an empty gap in her chest, was being barred from synagogue. Even after twelve years, she missed it like no other thing--the men swaying as their voices droned the ancient language, the women covered and silent among each other, all the heads bowed before God, sending up the prayers, the blessings, the songs into the open space.

Once, as a girl, she had snuck into the synagogue during the early morning and had watched the square of sunlight from the doorway dazzle the walls into white heat. It seemed to her that God had poured a love out through that sunlight, a love for everything in the world, even for things as mundane and inanimate as stones and mortar, and the wall had responded to that love by turning bright with fire.

But that was a long time ago now. The door to that space was barred to the unclean. She would never be pure enough to enter again. Still she missed the synagogue, more than human touch,

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| <p>That morning the rasp in his daughter's lungs had changed, thickened, as if she were no longer breathing through water but through mud.</p> <p>Her eyes had gone glassy, her cheeks looked blue. Almost without thinking, he stumbled down through the city gate to the place on the water where the rabbi's boat had come ashore. The crowd was moving slowly toward the town, but they fell back before Jairus with an almost audible shock. Is that Jairus the synagogue elder? Here?</p> <p><b>He would give anything...</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">...to be a nobody,</p> <p>to be able to sneak to the Galilean, by night or by some back way, to bring him to his daughter apart from the crowds...</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>worthy of healing.</b></p> <p>But for a man like Jairus, in a town like this, there was no sneaking. There were only public eyes and the shame of a synagogue leader asking for help from a homeless preacher...</p> <p style="text-align: center;">...and for what?</p> | <p>more than the conversation of the women at the well in the early mornings, more than the dancing at festivals and the food passed from hand to hand around the table and the stories told over a hearth fire in the winter months, more than all these things. And the missing seemed part of the blood and the ache in her body.</p> <p>She had heard that the rabbi from Nazareth was coming,</p> <p>but still it surprised her to happen upon the crowd coming in through the city gate.</p> <p><b>She would give anything</b><br/>to be somebody,</p> <p>to be able to march up to him in the eyes of all,</p> <p>a part of the crowd,<br/><b>worthy of healing.</b></p> <p>But for what?</p> |
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| <p style="text-align: center;">For a daughter whom he loved too much.</p> <p>The crowd parted. Jairus stalled, and then turned to go, to save himself from this humiliation and its repercussions.</p> <p>But out of the corner of his eye he saw the rabbi from Nazareth, moving toward him in a blur of brilliant clothes...</p> <p style="text-align: center;">...a small man who walked the earth gently.</p> <p>"Please," Jairus heard himself saying. "Save my daughter."</p> <p>"Please. Please." Once he had started saying it he found he couldn't stop, this desperate word choking out of him.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">"Please."</p> <p style="text-align: right;">"Please."</p> <p>Jairus dropped to his knees and then to the ground, the baking smell of dust filled his nostrils...</p> <p style="text-align: right;">...He was begging.</p> | <p>She was unloved, untouchable.</p> <p>She ducked her head and started aside before the insults could begin,</p> <p>before anyone would notice that a contaminant was among them.</p> <p>But out of the corner of her eye ...</p> <p style="text-align: right;">...she caught view of him,</p> <p>his skin bronzed by the sun, his linen robes breathing in the wind, a kindness that pooled in his dark eyes.</p> <p>She froze, and a secret thought hovered along the edge of her mind.</p> <p>A thought so scary, so counter to everything she knew about herself, that she felt as if she couldn't breathe.</p> <p>The crowd swirled around her. She cowered there.</p> <p>He was passing this way.</p> <p>The thought fluttered at her like a moth.</p> <p>"Believe," it said.</p> <p>"Believe."</p> |
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| <p>He was down like a dog before this crazy, homeless rabbi from Galilee, this man with the kind eyes...</p> <p>...and Jairus had never felt more free.</p> <p>"Please," he said.</p> <p>"Please.</p> <p><b>Please.</b></p> <p><b>Please."</b></p> <p><b>And he reached out his hand.</b></p> | <p>He brushed passed. The robes he wore were molten white in the sunlight that poured over them.</p> <p>And the thought sped up as she slipped behind him.</p> <p>"Believe.</p> <p>Believe.</p> <p><b>Believe.</b></p> <p><b>Believe."</b></p> <p><b>And she reached out her hand.</b></p> |
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