

Desperation & Baptism (27June21)
Mark 5:21-43

You may well consider this a joyous day.

But I invite you to pause and notice the predominant mood of the Gospel reading, of those who come to approach Jesus: the father with the dying daughter and the chronically ill woman in the crowd. What would you say their moods are? What are their attitudes?

One characterization that came to mind is desperation. They are desperate as they approach Jesus. Desperation, a word that literally comes from the Latin for “hopeless,” and yet in this case maybe we’d see it actually circling back around to faith. They are so hopelessly despairing that it makes them hopeful, faith-full, putting trust in Jesus.

A woman has been sick for 12 years. It’s tough for me to imagine that compounding of her suffering. She’d also endured bad health care and gotten no medical relief. To exacerbate her problems, chasing down those treatments and cures left her broke, a health care problem we still haven’t managed to remedy. In all of that, it seems she turns to Jesus almost as a last-ditch effort.

And then the story goes even beyond last-ditch efforts, from the far-fetched desperation to the downright absurd. Messengers come to the father and tell him his daughter has died. They raise the very rational question, “Why trouble the teacher any further?” That is a moment without hope. Desperate. What can be done in the face of death? There are clearly no other solutions and, further, why even bother Jesus?

From those truly desperate situations, it may seem like a leap to your own happenstance. Again, you may well consider this a joyous day and feel happy to be here, feel like happy days are here again...or are at least a little closer.

But with that, I’d point out your own peculiarity as you yourself are approaching Jesus. I suspect you’ve been eager to be here, waiting for this opportunity, maybe talking to others for months about when it would finally happen. Why? What’s the big deal?

At least as obscure, for 67 weeks of online worship, you’ve been tuning in religiously (ha). I don’t know if there are any perfect attendance awards, but no matter what, it’s a lot of dedication to have figured out how to participate in worship from your living room through a screen. Or maybe you hadn’t been tuning in and had felt cut off and unable to connect, which is certainly its own kind of desperation.

Now, you may say you come to church at least partly because of your friends and the relationships here. But you must also need something that isn’t offered elsewhere in life. The other solutions don’t quite cut it, whether that’s like the woman in the Bible story who spent all she had on other answers and was still looking, still in need, or like the father in the story who simply had nowhere else to turn at a dead end, no obvious way out. You need more than doctors and medical experts, need more than cultural answers, need some relief. You need something in the face of death and need explanations for life. Something of that brings you to approach Jesus, even if it’s mostly with chronic low-grade desperation.

And then there’s Oliver Robert.

Olly didn’t have a choice to come this morning. It wasn’t his own longing and desperation. The cute little ham with a big toothy grin, when the grin isn’t obscured by chewing on his toes, he may not seem to have the needs that fit our Bible story. But Rachel and Matt brought him here for some reason. They decided they needed to approach Jesus, expecting there’s some solution that Olly needs. They’re likely not thinking directly of his death this morning, not confronting an immediate fearful situation like the parent in the story.

And yet, here they are for this odd practice that splashes water at a baby and proclaims healing, wholeness, cure, some sort of answer of life. They say they’re here because they can count on unconditional love, embodied in this loving community and still more beyond that from God. They trust that a question of “why trouble the teacher any further” would be moot, since with Jesus you can trouble him for any little thing and his unconditional love will always be ready and

responsive to our needs, even beyond that ultimate point of death.



As we are trusting that for young Oliver Robert, and as the promise of God’s love for him also renews our hope for ourselves, it’s worth observing a note about faith.

Jesus repeats his famous phrase “your faith has made you well.” It could also be translated “your faith has saved you.” It can give the impression that the sick woman overcame desperation in order to believe firmly and deeply enough to be healed. That she was so convinced and so dedicated she somehow earned the good thing she was after from Jesus. It becomes not only having to hold up our end of the bargain to receive God’s goodness, but that the whole thing is initiated by and dependent on us, needing to trouble Jesus in prayer and pester him and be insistent on what we want and need, and finally he’ll come around to help.

But as we witness the promises to Oliver, we have to observe his faith doesn’t make a lick of difference. Maybe we see his parents believing on his behalf, bringing him and his needs to Jesus, just as the daughter in the story wasn’t saved by *her* own faith; she was dead and couldn’t do anything. Her father was begging and pleading for her.

And yet the begging, pleading, praying, yearning isn’t about convincing Jesus to be good or God to be loving. Power simply flows out from Jesus. The love is unearned and unconditional. In the story, we are reminded it’s for community leaders with obedient servants and it’s for a poor unnamed woman. It’s for all of us. Always.

Baptism, then, is not something we do to change God’s mind, for saving Oliver instead of condemning or punishing him. Baptism isn’t for God. It’s for Oliver, for us. It’s to be used as the seal and reminder of who God is for him and for us, an assurance of unconditional love and saving grace, of Jesus’ presence and the gift of his eternal and abundant life in and for us through everything, through illness and troubles and worries. In good and joyous times. Even through death.

Baptism, and this church service itself, are God’s response to our desperation. The answer isn’t in finding some obscure hope, not in clinging tenaciously to an outlandish belief, not in trying to muster enough faith that crawls out of desperation and bootstrap pulls ourselves up to be able to approach Jesus. Rather, Jesus comes to you amid desperation, finds you in your homes and on deathbeds, as his power flows out to you. In all your desperate needs and despairing longings, he shows up with faith, with hope, with love. And these abide. Always.