

Wading Through the Crowd to See You Face to Face
Reading from the Gospels: Mark 5:21-43

Let us begin this morning with two quotes from women about fathers and one quote from a father about daughters. The first is from the best-selling memoir, *Becoming*, by Michelle Obama. She writes: "I let his voice be my comfort. It bore no trace of pain or self-pity, carrying only good humor and softness and just the tiniest hint of jazz. I lived on it as if it were oxygen. It was sustaining, and it was always enough."

The second quote is from a work of fiction by British humorist Jennifer Joyce. One of her characters responds to the question of whether she misses her father: "I think I miss the idea of him. I don't miss his rules or the yelling or the way he'd belittle us. I don't miss his drinking or the rages, but I miss having a dad, you know?"

The third quote is from the mid 20th Century historian, James Adams, who observed, "Any astronomer can predict with absolute accuracy just where every star in the universe will be at 11:30 tonight. He can make no such prediction about his teenage daughter."

The brief comments from these three distinct voices underscore the reality that the father-daughter image cannot be consigned to a

singular depiction. Father/daughter relationships can be life giving or tragic; white hot fury or cool as a Spring breeze; quiet or choleric; tinged with joy or a 24/7 horror movie; the shining knight and his little princess or Capra's sinister Mr. Potter vs. DePalma's combustible Carrie; as warm as the tears that flow when you walk her down the aisle or as impassive as those stone faces standing sentry on Easter Island. And let's be honest, there are times when three or four of those polarities are experienced in the span of a single day.

You know those memes that dissect our perceptions of our place in the world: How I want others to perceive me; How I perceive me; How others do perceive me; What I am actually doing? We want to characterize our relationships with our children with a *Hallmark* pen - "What I wanted most for my daughter was that she be able to soar confidently in her own sky, wherever that might be." How we want others to characterize our kinship with our kids - "They are master gardeners and what a joy to see their children bloom so bright." How others do perceive our parent/child relationship - "Can you believe they allowed her to get away with wearing that?" How we actually

experience it - "She's going to college in the Fall. I love her, but I can't wait."

Perhaps the best word to describe the father/daughter relationship, or for that matter, any parent/child relationship is **fraught**, the 1st cousin of complicated. It swings from joy to grief to insult to fear to gratitude to discouragement to hope, and during adolescence, that could all be before breakfast.

So let us be careful not to pour too much syrup in characterizing the father/daughter dynamic in our story today.

Jesus has just disembarked from a boat, having landed on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. He's returning from an inauspicious debut on the opposite shore, the land of the Gerasenes, where he relieved a man of his demons and enraged pig farmers everywhere because the demons just hopped into the pigs, with the whole herd jumping off a cliff. Mark tells us the Gerasene pork producer association began to beg Jesus to leave their neighborhood. So, you have to think it was a welcome, spirit-enlivening sight, at least for the disciples, to

return home where the people were eager to see Jesus, like a baseball team returning to their ballpark after a rough road trip.

Of course, the refreshing sight of the hometown crowd was accompanied by the stress of negotiating the cloying efforts of the people wrestling to get close to the celebrity passenger climbing out of the disciples' boat. Even without the aid of the internet, news of Jesus' otherworldly exploits had spread quickly, and so a growing challenge for Jesus and his disciples was navigating a crowd in which each person had arrived with their own individual motivations and agendas.

This wasn't a ticketed symphony audience dutifully following an accepted decorum: don't clap at the end of a movement; don't stop clapping until the artist leaves the stage; no photos or recording lest ye be cast into the outer darkness. Rather, this crowd would be more like those pressing and pushing their way to get close to the Beatles or Gandhi. Can I touch him, get an autograph? Or here with Jesus, perhaps if I can get him to notice me, I can convince him to intercede in some broken place in my life.

Among the supplicants was someone you wouldn't expect to be cloying their way to get to Jesus, certainly not with such desperate deference. Mark reports, "one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw [Jesus], fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly." This is not the decorum you would expect, particularly in such a public way, from someone so highly influential and respected in the life of a community. Typically, such dramatic and emotional behavior would be seen by the synagogue leader as undignified and by the crowd as shocking; besides, he'd probably have to dry clean his pinstripe suit.

A leader of a synagogue would not be the beggar, but the beggee, people approaching him for counsel, resources, for intervention; a person of substance, influence, and most likely wealth. Indeed, it may have been his influence or reputation that allowed him to move through the line to the front.

When Jairus came face-to-face with Jesus, he "fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly. "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." Desperation has a way of eclipsing dignity, rendering it irrelevant.

"My little girl." We discover that Jairus' "little girl," is actually 12, just a year or two short of the age when Jesus' mother, Mary, was engaged to Joseph. Yet, in fear of losing her, Jairus' mind is enveloped with the memory of walking with his infant daughter in his arms late at night, calming her troubled sobs, her head leaning into the nape of his neck as she slowly drifts back to sleep.

We aren't told the status of their relationship. We don't know if Jairus is the perpetually doting dad and she his adoring acolyte. We don't know if he is the stone-faced patriarchal autocrat or if she is the resentful rebel bent on wounding him even if it wounds her more. We don't know if his desperation is fueled by the guilt of all that he had left undone and unsaid, or possibly things said and done that could not be taken back. Or is his desperation powered by the terror of losing someone whose company he cherished, someone whose laughter he adored? We don't often know as much as we think about what fertilizes desperation. What we know is Jairus' is desperate enough to make a scene, to abandon character, to beg for Christ's intervention.

"My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live." And Mark reports that Jesus went with him.

Before they get too far, our story is interrupted by another story. It's like a movie interrupted by a short film, and yet, there is a connection. A woman, banished from crowds, wiggles her way through the crowd, desperately seeking to get in front of Jesus. She has suffered with a debilitating menstrual condition as long as Jairus' daughter has been alive. It is a condition that renders her, and anyone who comes into contact with her, unclean in the eyes of the religious authorities, barring her from worship, from community, from even the touch of another person. Imagine the isolation, the inevitable cloud of depression, the cold exile from the touch of family, friends, community.

Just like Jairus, she believes that Jesus' touch is the key to life and wholeness. If she can just sneak close enough to touch but the fringe of his garment. She extends her arm, she reaches out, she catches just the billowing of Jesus' cloak, she is whole again. The connection was made, such that Jesus felt the touch of one he could not see and

whom the disciples could not identify. So, the woman identified herself and Jesus applauded such faith.

However, as Jesus is speaking, the swoopers descend on Jairus. Do you know the swoopers? A crisis arises and the swoopers swoop in. These are not the gracious saints whose ministry offers life support when your world is inverted, and your breath is stolen. The swoopers, God bless them, have good intentions but may be more concerned about their compulsion to establish control, exert power, and utter a litany of *you shoulds*... You are in crisis, and their idea of help is getting you to meet their expectations.

In Jairus' case, it is: "You are not where you need to be. You don't even know your daughter is dead because you were not there. That teacher is not going to be much use now. Let him be and get thee back home where you're supposed to be."

Notice, that Jesus doesn't get defensive or worked up. He just calmly tells Jairus to not fear and keep the faith. They wade through the circus of mourning, presumption, and even derision to get to Jairus' 12-year-old daughter, where Jesus exiles the cacophonous crowd, thus

unswooping the swoopers. He then takes the tweenager by the hand, uttering those beautiful words in his native tongue of Aramaic. "Talitha cum." Little girl, get up. Jesus then told the family to get her something to eat. The personal and present compassion of the Lord of all. That's what strikes me in all of this. The personal and present compassion of the Lord of all.

The healing stories of Jesus present both danger and hope to the reader. The danger is when we read them as though there is some formula that, if we calculate and perform it just right, we or the people we care for will suddenly be freed from malady, clean and clear.

There is no formula, no blueprint, no technique, no magic words. Healing is a mystery. It comes by unexpected means, from a variety of sources, and perhaps in a majority of circumstances, not in a way you anticipated or a way for which you had hoped. And if you think about it, death itself is a form of healing. Jesus said to the one bearing the cross beside him, "Today, you shall be with me in paradise." John of Patmos give us the vision: "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

In a way, healing is not grasping at life; healing is loosening our white-knuckled grip on life so that we, by God's grace, can live more fully no matter what our condition may be. The truth is that Jairus' daughter and the woman touching Jesus' cloak will experience illness again and at some point, death itself. What we read here is that there is a kingdom, a path to wholeness, a way of life much larger than our world and beyond our flawed conceiving. Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." It is an abundance that is sustaining and healing no matter your circumstances, regardless of your ongoing condition.

Michael Lindvall had a friend, a person of deep faith, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's when he was still in his fifties. He and his wife prayed that he might be healed. Twenty years later, he was in the last debilitating stages of the disease. Nevertheless, he told Lindvall that his prayers had been answered. He said in all sincerity, "I have been healed, not of Parkinson's disease, but I have been healed of my fear of Parkinson's disease."

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The other hope mixed with danger in our text is the power of touch. Touch can destroy and touch can heal. It can wreck relationships or open the door to them. It can wound or it can bring healing. Yet, when I speak of the healing power of touch, it's not like Peter Parker discovering that he can shoot spiderwebs out of his hands. The power of touch used discretely and appropriately can be an instrument of healing.

Research psychologist, Dacher Keltner says, "A pat on the back, a caress of the arm — these are every day, incidental gestures that we usually take for granted, thanks to our amazingly dexterous hands. But after years spent immersed in the science of touch, I can tell you that they are far more profound than we usually realize: They are our primary language of compassion, and a primary means for spreading compassion." (Dacher Keltner, *The Power of Touch*)

Duke neuroscientist, Saul Schanberg said, "Touch is far more essential than our other senses. ... It's ten times stronger than verbal or emotional contact." Even I, Dr. Hugless, understand and appreciate that.

As I was writing this, out my window I spied a father walking with his young child, maybe two or three years old. The father gently held his child's hand, his right shoulder slumping slightly to make it more comfortable for his child's reach. They were just out walking, with no particular destination. The child's eyes were like that of an explorer, taking in with wonder all this big ol' world presented. His stride was relaxed and secure, trusting the hand leading him. The father's pace was intentionally measured so as not to force the child to adapt to him, his right hand holding his child's left. With his left hand, the father was carrying a small stuffed bear along with another toy the child had determined were essential for braving the outside world.

For me, it was like watching Jesus in Galilee, his hand gently on the shoulder of an anxious father. I am with you. Hold on. Will you let me help you carry your burden? "Do not fear, only believe." Amen.