

Who Wants To Be Healed

Mark 5:21-43

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on June 27, 2021

When I think about the crowds clamoring for Jesus and what that must have been like, one memory comes to mind: camping out for Duke basketball tickets. If you're not aware of this bizarre and hallowed tradition within the world of college athletics, allow me to fill you in.

So Duke, one of the most celebrated teams in the history of college basketball, plays in one of college basketball's smallest arenas—a recipe for one of the most thrilling fan experiences in all sports; also a recipe for what our economist friends call scarcity. Scarcity creates demand, in this case such that people are willing to—in the case of ordinary citizens, pay exorbitant amounts of money; or in the case of Duke students, endure sadistic sociological experiments—in the hope of obtaining tickets. The experiment is called the Duke Basketball Campout.

Here's how it worked: Campout was held from a Friday afternoon to a Sunday morning in a field on campus. There was a tent set up on virtually every square foot of ground. I kid you not the first year I had to sleep on a 45 degree incline that was half grass and half sidewalk. Picture a slum, basically. At the center of the tent city was a giant music-festival style tent. Every so often, probably around 30 times total over the course of the weekend, at purposely random increments, an air raid siren would go off at the central tent. This meant that every person in the campground had to go “check-in” with their ID card at the central tent. At every siren, chaos would ignite. Snacks would fly through the air. Bodies would collide. Cornhole scores would be forgotten in an instant.

The goal is to make it to the end of the weekend without missing any check-ins. (I think you were allowed one free miss.) You might think - that doesn't sound too difficult. But ask yourself - How would a field full of young idiots fill the rest of those hours? And how might those decisions make it easier or more difficult to, say, wake-up and walk 100 yards to another tent. Here's the real kicker though: if you made it to the end of the weekend successfully only having missed only one check-in, then your name gets thrown into a lottery, in which you have about a 30% chance of winning basketball tickets. Earning entrance to Cameron Indoor Stadium on game day may not be an experience of miraculous healing, but it's probably as close as I have come in this life.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is a Duke basketball ticket. Everybody wants him. If we zoom out a tiny bit for context, what's happening in this part of Mark's Gospel is almost comical. Jesus and the disciples are pressed in by crowds on one side of the Sea of Galilee. Their only way to escape the clamoring crowds is to get in a boat and row to the other side. Only then the crowds run to the other side and start crowding them back towards the water. So they simply get back in the boat and return to the side they first came from. You can see the scene playing out in a black and white film pantomime sketch. Jesus has charisma, he has wisdom, he has miracles, but most desirable of all, Jesus has the power to heal.

In this episode, we zoom in on just two members of the clamoring throng. And they're about as opposite as they can be.

One is Jairus, a leader of the local synagogue. He is a prominent member of the community. We're not often told the names of one-off side characters in the Gospels. He's the kind of person that can show up late and will be ushered to the front of the line anyway. He is one of those people who gets the close-up parking spaces at the UT football games. I imagine the crowds part when they see Jairus approaching, for not only is he a respected local leader, that his daughter is on death's door is also probably known to all. "Come lay your hands on her," he says to Jesus, "so that she may be made well and live." Jesus, who seems often to have a soft spot for parents with sick children, says "Of course." And they head off in the direction of Jairus's house. It looks like this will be another simple and straightforward story about Jesus healing the sick.

But the crowds do not make it easy for Jesus and the disciples to move very quickly to Jairus's house. Plus, others are still trying to get his attention. Others want Duke basketball tickets too. And we're told about a woman who has had a hemorrhage for 12 years. She's tried everything. She's lost everything. Insurance refuses to cover it. And she is desperate. And aggressive. She presses towards Jesus in the crowds and reaches out and grabs hold of Jesus' cloak, hoping that that in and of itself may be sufficient for Jesus' healing power to zap out of him and into her.

The woman essentially cuts in line—a move bold in its own right, but made all the more so when you understand the laws about ritual purity underneath this story. The woman's condition essentially rendered her permanently and irreversibly ritually unclean, which not only meant she couldn't worship in the temple, but she had to live isolated from all others, because anyone she touched would also become ritually unclean. She's desperate enough to flaunt all that. And the astonishing thing is that Jesus lets her. Jesus approves of her, heals her and blesses her.

It sounds sacrilegious to say that Jesus has favorites, but reading through any of the Gospels, nothing could be more obvious than that Jesus absolutely has favorites. It's the marginalized. He spends the majority of his time with them. He not only allows this woman to interrupt his journey to the home of an "important man;" he welcomes it, he stops everything, he gives her all the time she wants, enough for her to share her "whole truth." He makes her his number one priority. Jesus couldn't in good conscience go to heal the daughter of the wealthy man while this marginalized woman continued to suffer right in his face. Jesus does have favorites. The last shall always be first with Jesus. That's the first lesson from this story.

It turns out that while Jesus was paying attention to the woman with the hemorrhage, Jairus's daughter has died. The very clear implication is that the interruption cost Jairus's daughter her life. Everyone in the story but Jesus is looking at the world through the economist lens of scarcity. There's only so much time. And there's only so much healing. And the clock has simply run out. What only Jesus knows is that he operates not in an economy of scarcity, but of abundance. An economy in which everyone who wants a Duke basketball ticket gets a Duke basketball ticket. An economy in which there's always enough healing for anyone who wants it. Where what is good for one person is also good for that person's neighbor. With the God of the Universe, you never run out of time. And you never run out of life.

Here we see two lessons at once, lessons that appear almost contradictory, but that paradoxically are simultaneously true with Jesus: Jesus has favorites. But Jesus loves everybody the same. Jesus does give priority to the marginalized. But Jesus makes time for everyone.

If we had to choose, the model commended to us is clearly the unnamed woman. What would it be like to have faith so strong you could flaunt social convention to boldly associate yourself with Jesus, especially if doing so exposed your very worst secrets, your very deepest held burdens to the whole world. May we all have such faith. But I also wonder if Jairus isn't his own kind of role model for some of us too. I can't help but notice that the text does not say what it seems obvious it should say right after Jairus's friends come to him and tell him his daughter has died and not to bother the teacher anymore, which is something like, "And so Jairus went into a rage and screamed 'This is not fair! I was in line first! My daughter would still be alive if you hadn't stopped to care for this woman that clearly nobody else cares about anyway. The whole town is worried about my daughter. This is not fair.' Is it possible that Jairus stood aside willingly, even agreeing with Jesus that he should first attend to this woman, believing even, perhaps, that even his daughter's death could not stop Jesus from healing her? Is it possible that Jairus saw in some small way how his salvation would be incomplete if this woman in front of him continued to suffer? Sometimes the best thing those in powerful positions can do is simply give others their place in line.

In the end I'm not sure we have to choose. Because both Jairus and the unnamed woman share in common something I'm not sure many of us can claim: They're both standing in front of Jesus and asking for healing. That's an accomplishment in and of itself. Who among us is bold enough to stand up in public and admit something as simple as: I do not have it all together. I am in pain. My life is not going how I planned it. I worry all the time. I'm lonely. This is the main reason that generally speaking more people experience personal transformation in 12-step meetings like AA than they do in church. Because AA meetings always start the same way. You say, "My name is Zac and I'm an alcoholic." "My name is Zac and I do not have it all together." "My name is Zac and I need healing." Once you have started there, you're ready to go chasing after Jesus. To chase him from shore to shore. To press through the crowd and reach.

And notice, Jesus does not leave either the unnamed woman or Jairus's daughter alone with just a healing. The woman got what she came for with a simple touch and she was about to slip away back into the crowd. But Jesus stopped everything and said "Who was that?" Physical healing is not enough. I want to know everything. I want to know the whole truth. I want to know you. To have a relationship with you. And we get the lovely, bizarre detail at the end of the Jairus story about Jesus instructing someone to give his daughter something to eat. Another way of saying, "Now this girl has to keep living. She has been healed, yes, but now she needs nourishment."

I wonder what it is you need healing from today. I wonder what in your heart wants to reach out towards Jesus. You don't have to rush, remember. Jesus will get to each of you eventually. Jesus isn't going to run out of time for you. But I do think it is worth asking yourself, If you already know you need healing, why would you want to wait?

Amen.