Overcoming Fear

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Mark 51-43

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We live in fearful times. Terrorist attacks, cyberterrorism, gun violence, global warming, take your pick. As an avid history reader, let me caution you here. Our time and place are no more dangerous and fearful than any other time in human history.

Here is my take on what is happening. There is a whole lot of fearmongering going on. For advertisers, politicians and news pundits alike, your fear is worth millions. People have decided they can win votes and make big money by exploiting our fears since it is an easy emotion to manipulate. I have the sneaking suspicion that fear is driving much of our current debate over illegal immigration right now.

Jesus said, “Do not fear; just believe.” Today’s story is about overcoming fear with faith.

Today’s lesson is actually two stories rolled into one. Mark likes to tell stories together to create a sandwich effect. He begins by telling a story about a man begging for Jesus’ help in healing his 12-year-old daughter. Then, he interrupts to tell a second story about a woman who receives healing from Jesus. Finally, Mark circles back to finish the first story.

Our first story centers on Jairus, a leader in the synagogue. He comes to Jesus, begging him to come and heal his critically ill daughter. Jesus agrees to go with him, accompanied by a large crowd.

In the second story, there is a woman in the crowd who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years. She has tried every doctor and miracle cure known to man, but nothing has worked.
Her bleeding makes her ceremoniously unclean. Her condition also qualifies her as an outsider in the very synagogue where Jairus is leader.

She does not want to do anything to draw attention to herself. So, she determines just to touch Jesus’ robe. Just a touch is all. No one else will ever know.

When she touches Jesus’ robe, her bleeding stops. Just like that. She knows instantly Jesus has healed her.

Jesus stops dead in his tracks and says the words she fears most, “Who touched me?” His disciples react with understandable surprise: “Master; all these people are touching you. How can you say, who touched me?”

“No,” Jesus insists. “Someone has touched me. I know it because power has gone out of me” (Luke 8:46). Somehow, Jesus is able to discriminate between an elbowing crowd and the anxious tug of faith.

This woman, who had hoped for a secret healing now steps forward, expecting condemnation. After all, condemnation is all she has ever known. Instead, Jesus commends her. “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.”

It is gracious for Jesus to call her out this way. Otherwise, it might have taken her a long time to overcome the prejudice and scorn that has built up over the years. By not allowing her to vanish into the crowd. Jesus not only heals her illness but also heals her shame.
With this second story told, Mark reverts to finishing the first story. Jairus’ servants announce, “Jairus, your daughter is dead. Why bother the teacher any longer” (5:35). They regard Jesus as only a teacher since death marks the limits of the powers available to him.

The apparent delay on Jairus’ side proves fatal for his daughter. He must have been fuming at the time Jesus took for this woman. Why is he dawdling? I was here first. Can’t we deal with this woman’s chronic condition later?

Jesus overhears the conversation and tells Jairus, “Don’t be afraid; just believe.” “Don’t be afraid” and “just believe” both function as present imperatives. Jesus commands Jairus to stop fearing and keep believing.

What is Jairus supposed to believe? Jairus came to Jesus at the outset, believing he could heal his daughter. Now, Jesus tells him that he must go on believing. He must trust Jesus for whatever happens next.

They arrive at Jairus’ home to a house full of mourners. Jesus says cryptically, “Why are you weeping? She is not dead. She is only sleeping” (5:39). Everybody laughs. Oh sure, sleeping. Real funny, Jesus.

Jesus orders everyone out of the house except his closest disciples, Peter, James and John, as well as the girl’s parents. Jesus takes the little girl by the hand. It’s a shocking gesture, since touching a dead body was considered unclean. He says
to her in Aramaic, “Tabitha cumi” meaning, “Little girl, get up.” Immediately, she opens her eyes. Everyone is astonished. I should say so.

These two stories juxtapose each other for good reason. First, both stories are about daughters. Jesus says to the woman, “Daughter, your faith has healed you” which matches with Jairus’ daughter in the first story. Both stories also reference the number twelve. The girl in the first story is 12 years old, while the woman in the second story has been chronically ill for 12 years.

Second, both stories are about belief or faith acting as its synonym. Jesus says to Jairus, “Do not fear; just believe.” Jesus says to this unnamed woman, “Daughter, your faith has healed you.” Jesus could heal these people without any faith or belief on their part but evidently, Jesus desires some measure of reciprocity on their side.

Third, while these two people could not have been more different, both come to Jesus because of their extreme need. On the surface, these two people could not be more different. Jairus is socially prominent, a leader in the synagogue. This woman is anonymous, ostracized from the very temple where Jairus is leader. Yet, both come to Jesus desperate for a cure.

I identify with these two people. I come to Jesus, desperate at times. Heal this person. Help my children. Save me from this predicament. Yet the answer doesn’t always come when and where I expect it. To all who wait like Jairus, pay attention to this story. I have not forgotten
you. The journey I began with you, I will finish. “Do not fear; just believe.”

“Do not fear” is a common directive from Jesus. He tells Peter when he walks on water, “Do not fear. It is I. Do not be afraid” (Matthew 14:27). He says to a crowd of people, worn down with worry, “Do not fear, little flock. It is the Father’s will to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). He says to his disciples, “Do not fear those who kill the body but those who kill the soul” (Matthew 10:28). He says to the women at the empty tomb, “Do not be afraid. Go to Galilee and there you will see me.” (Matthew 28:10). If God raises the dead, what have we to fear?

When it comes to fear, it is important to discriminate normal, God-given fears from excessive, illogical fears. If I am sitting at a picnic table and a bear joins me for lunch, I am going to be afraid. My fears would be justified. Encountering a bear in the wild is a dangerous prospect. Yet, suppose I go to the zoo, see a bear and become afraid. Such fear would be excessive and illogical. There is little reason for being afraid of a bear in a zoo.

Phobia is the clinical name for exaggerated, illogical fears. There are at least 500 phobias common enough to have a name.

I titled this sermon *Overcoming Fear*. Overcome fear with faith. Do not fear; only believe. I came upon an article
written by Oprah Winfrey this week. Her message about overcoming fear is entirely one of self-determination and improvement. She urged her readers not to let fear block their paths. She applied her religion of positive thinking to the problems posed by fear.

Her approach contrasts sharply with a sermon I read by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He preached it in a Berlin church in 1933 during a time of considerable unrest in Germany, just 15 days before Hitler became Chancellor. Bonhoeffer concludes his sermon, “Jesus alone is Lord over fear; it knows him as its master; it gives way to him alone. So, look to Christ when you are afraid.”

Let’s see, the power of positive thinking to block fear or look to Christ when you are afraid. I’m going with Bonhoeffer. Jesus is Lord over fear.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? I have three questions for your consideration as we focus on practical application.

First question. What do you fear? You may be saying to yourself, I don’t fear anything. You may not call it fear, but there are things that trigger anxiety and panic in you. Fear about the future. Fear about the well-being of someone in your family. Fear about a difficult conversation that you need to have with someone. Fear about your health. Fear
about your job. Fear about dying. It is important for us to confront our fears head-on.

Second question. Does what you watch add to your fear or lessen them? There is plenty of research to substantiate that substantial amounts of screen time lowers self-esteem and increases anxiety. Some of you really need to unplug. Your adverse reaction to this suggestion may tell you how attached you are to your electronic devices.

Third question. When in your week do you give God your undivided attention? Last Sunday, I talked about 11 Pressure Points that have deep impact on us. Our reaction to these pressure points shapes our behaviors, whether for good or ill. We want you to give serious attention this summer to what God says to you through His Word. Let me take you back to the card we distributed in worship last Sunday. You will find this card in your pew racks. You can also access it online.

Take the first pressure point regarding fear. Negative emotions like fear rob us of God’s best. Our memory verse from Isaiah addresses this matter of fear. “Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you by my righteous right hand” (41:10).

We have identified five Psalms about fear for you to read and reflect:

Psalm 121—“The Lord watches over your life.”
Psalm 56—“When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.”
Psalm 27—“The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?”
Psalm 46—“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”
Psalm 91—“You will not fear the terror of the night or the arrow that flies by day.”
“Do not fear; only believe.” Overcome fear with faith.