

“Desperate Times and Desperate Measures”
Rev. Andrew Harris · June 27, 2021

Mark 5:21-43

Jesus crossed the lake again, and on the other side a large crowd gathered around him on the shore. Jairus, one of the synagogue leaders, came forward. When he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet and pleaded with him, “My daughter is about to die. Please, come and place your hands on her so that she can be healed and live.” So Jesus went with him.

A swarm of people were following Jesus, crowding in on him. A woman was there who had been bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a lot under the care of many doctors, and had spent everything she had without getting any better. In fact, she had gotten worse. Because she had heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his clothes. She was thinking, If I can just touch his clothes, I’ll be healed. Her bleeding stopped immediately, and she sensed in her body that her illness had been healed.

At that very moment, Jesus recognized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?”

His disciples said to him, “Don’t you see the crowd pressing against you? Yet you ask, ‘Who touched me?’” But Jesus looked around carefully to see who had done it.

The woman, full of fear and trembling, came forward. Knowing what had happened to her, she fell down in front of Jesus and told him the whole truth. He responded, “Daughter, your faith has healed you; go in peace, healed from your disease.”

While Jesus was still speaking with her, messengers came from the synagogue leader’s house, saying to Jairus, “Your daughter has died. Why bother the teacher any longer?”

But Jesus overheard their report and said to the synagogue leader, “Don’t be afraid; just keep trusting.” He didn’t allow anyone to follow him except Peter, James, and John, James’ brother. They came to the synagogue leader’s house, and he saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, “What’s all this commotion and crying about? The child isn’t dead. She’s only sleeping.” They laughed at him, but he threw them all out. Then, taking the child’s parents and his disciples with him, he went to the room where the child was. Taking her hand, he said to her, “*Talitha kum*,” which means, “Young woman, get up.” Suddenly the young woman got up and began to walk around. She was 12 years old. They were shocked! He gave them strict orders that no one should know what had happened. Then he told them to give her something to eat.

In today's Gospel lesson, we hear two stories of desperation, one nestled within the other. Jairus's daughter is sick, on the verge of death, so he comes to Jesus and begs him to lay his hands on her and heal her. On the way to Jairus's house, a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years emerges from the crowd and, in an act of desperation, touches Jesus's cloak and she is healed. Both Jairus and the bleeding woman are desperate, down to their last hope.

The words desperate and despair have the same latin root, meaning "without hope." But I think the shared etymology of these words belies their fundamental distinction. I'll concede that despair is a state of hopelessness, but I think that hope is the essential, defining characteristic of desperation. In desperate times, hope is all that we have.

Jairus has hope that the stories might be true; that this Jesus might be able to heal his daughter. The bleeding woman has hope that after twelve long years, after seeing many physicians, and spending all her money, that this strange yet acclaimed new teacher might have the power to cure the incurable. They are desperate, yes, but they are not hopeless. They cling to their hope like a drowning person clings to a lifesaver; like a frightened child clings to their parent's hand. Hope drives them and compels them like a desert wanderer searches for water. Their desperation is predicated on hope, otherwise they would sink into despair. It is this desperate hope, hope that refuses to give in to despair, that leads them to Jesus, the realization of our most desperate, impossible hopes.

This is what sets hope apart from its close relatives: desire and optimism. Barbara Sain, a professor of Theology at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, highlights the discrepancy between divine hope and its lesser corollary: desire. She says, desire is always connected to specific outcomes. If I hope for good weather on the weekend, the weather on the weekend determines whether my hope was fulfilled or not. When those days have passed, the hope is gone. When a hope is not fulfilled, people often respond by shifting the focus of their hope to a

different possible outcome. There's always next weekend. Sometimes, however, such refocusing is not possible.

The French philosopher Gabriel Marcel gives the example of a father waiting for the return of his son from a trip. The young man is long overdue, and no communication has come to explain the delay. There is no substitute for reunion with his son. This is a hope that cannot be refocused like the weekend weather. As time stretches on and the father waits, he can continue to hope or fall into despair. If the father's hope is based solely on a positive outcome, the desire for the return of his missing son, then he will fall into despair. Hope moves beyond this desire and refuses to give in to despair.

Similarly, optimism is an active, intellectual quality that moves beyond the involuntary passions of desire. It is the conscious ability to *hope* for the best, to embrace future possibilities with positivity. It's a form of will power, what some might call "wishful thinking." Optimism is a beneficial quality, a virtue to be sure, that enables us to imagine bright futures amidst difficult circumstances, but it falls short of ultimate hope. Optimism, being rooted in our own conscious will to imagine positive outcomes, will at one point or another, fail us. French writer Georges Bernanos puts it best, saying: "Optimism is a substitute for hope. One may encounter optimism anywhere. But hope must be won. To find hope it is necessary to go beyond despair. When one comes to the end of the night, one meets another dawn. The highest form of hope is despair overcome." Ultimate hope, divine hope, is more than mere desire or simple optimism.

Most of you are probably familiar with the story of Pandora's box from Greek mythology. After Prometheus steals fire from the gods, an angry Zeus devises a plot exact retribution from humanity. The gods of Olympus conspire together to create a woman, Pandora, endowed with many gifts who will be irresistible to Epimetheus, the brother of Prometheus, and the mark for Zeus's con. She carries a box - a jar really - which contains all the evils of the world. Of course, one day, out of curiosity, she opens the jar, and all of the evils of the world are released. Recognizing what has happened, she quickly tries to put the lid back on the jar but it's too late.

The only thing left in the jar, the one thing she managed to keep, was hope. The Greeks recognized one of the great gifts that we human beings possess: that even in the face of all the evils of the world, hope remains.

As our communities and our country begin to reopen, and as we prepare to worship in our sanctuary for the first time in over a year next week, I hear a lot about realized hopes. Finally, we're able to do the things we had hoped to do for so long. However, these past weeks and days I find myself thinking much more often about the unrealized hopes. People keep saying, we made it through, but not everyone made it through with us. For many people, the trials of the pandemic were secondary to personal trials, suffering, and grief. For many people, the hope of returning to the sanctuary is a hollow consolation in the face of the desperate hope for healing and wholeness that greets them every morning.

If anything, this pandemic has shown us that even the most far-reaching, inescapable global event in decades fades into trivial noise in the face of life's daily tragedies. All of last year's hopes and sacrifices, which were not insignificant, seem vain when held up to the inscrutable light of eternity — the empty spaces in the pews, the voices we won't hear, the faces we won't see, the handshakes and hugs that will not return.

How do we reopen a broken heart? What is the timeline for the end of grief?

These questions are not just flippant rhetorical reimaginings of pandemic buzzwords. They're useful invitations because they are primarily future looking. Hope, of course, is primarily future oriented, but despair is always chained to the past. Earlier I cited Gabriel Marcel's example of the fictional father awaiting the return of his son. When he falls into despair the father says, "I have been disappointed so many times, there is every reason to expect that I shall be again today." The cause of his despair is that he believes that his past predicts his future. The bleeding woman in today's scripture has been bleeding for 4,383 days and yet she does not expect that she shall again tomorrow. Her hope imagines new possibilities for the future instead of trapping her in the patterns of her past.

In his book *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Andrew Lester, writes about helping people identify their “future stories,” where clients are invited to imagine and describe their own expectations about the future. He says, “[future] stories collect both the remembered past and the imagined future, which are then integrated into the person’s present identity.” In the case of the bleeding woman, she did not allow her past and present circumstances to define her. For twelve years she lived as an unclean outcast, but that did not make her an unclean outcast. She imagined a possible future where she was welcomed back into beloved community, healed, saved, and that possibility became real in Jesus Christ.

William F. Lynch also writes about the potency of imagination in his book *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless*. He writes, “Hope is, in its most general terms, a sense of the possible.” He goes on to emphasize that hope is not just an individual trait, but a communal one, writing “[t]he truth is that hope is related to help in such a way that you cannot talk about one without talking of the other. Hope is truly on the inside of us, but hope is an interior sense that there is help on the outside of us.” From where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

We bear and share our hope with God and with one another. Our hopes are contained and sustained in each other. Without help which comes from God, which is realized in the person of Jesus Christ, and offered to each of us through the Holy Spirit which lives in and among us, our hopes would be mere desires, mere optimism, which would crumble in the face of despair. Divine hope transcends outcomes. Rain or shine, hope remains. Divine hope transcends desire. It has no specific goal or aim on which it hinges. If there were no thing at all, only God in an empty universe, hope would still remain.

Unaimed hope, hope without a specific goal or desired outcome, is a fundamental trust in existence, in the ground of all being. Unaimed hope, hope beyond goals, outcomes, and desires, divine hope, irrepressible hope, at its core, is faith that God will provide and that God will not let you go.

This is how we maintain hope in the face of despair, after the death of a child, after twelve years of bleeding, twelve years an outcast in your own land. This is how we maintain hope when we have nothing else. This is how we maintain hope when even the possibility that our children's children will have a habitable and hospitable planet to live on is rapidly evaporating. Our hope is not dependent on the outcome, but on the process. Hope remains. This is how even when we re-enter our sanctuary, even when we take off our masks, hope remains. Our hope is not tied to a specific time or place, event or outcome. Our hope is not tied to our past, our mistakes, our sins, or our memories.

St. Francois de Sales wrote, "I want very little, and what I do want I have very little wish for. I have hardly any desires, but if I were to be born again, I should have none at all. We should ask nothing, refuse nothing, but leave ourselves in the arms of divine Providence without wasting time in any desire, except to will what God wills of us." I think God wills us to embrace a future shaped by hope. Hope opens up the possibility of healing, wholeness, reconciliation, and salvation. Hope makes the impossible possible. When all else fails, hope remains, and with hope, divine God-given hope, all things are possible. Amen.