

June 28 Acts of Desperation Mark 5:21-43

When I was a junior in high school, I wasn't the dashing debonair man about town you see before you. I was late maturing and too shy to ask a girl to the prom or anything else. There was also the thing about being Baptist and ignorant about dancing.

Now my friends, all three of them, knew that my clown routine was a cover for my fear of females and they were hassling me about not going to junior prom. Each already had a date and when the subject came up, one of them said, "and I guess you're staying home, wimp."

Somehow, the words "I already have a date" jumped out of my mouth. *No you don't*, said John. *Yes I do*, I came back. *With who? Do you mean with whom? Whatever. I'm not sayin'. You don't have a date. Yes I do. I just don't like to broadcast it. Yea, well we can't wait to see this mystery woman.* I thought "Me neither."

Long story short, I began to approach every girl I knew, "so who are you going to prom with?" *You mean whom? Whatever.* I couldn't find anyone. As the days ticked by, I became more and more desperate. I almost asked Dana, a freshman who played the cello and had a crush on me, but I just couldn't bring myself to fulfill her life dream and then dash her hopes.

On the Sunday before prom weekend, I was in deep fervent prayer before worship started when an idea came to me. It was crazy, but I was way past rational. When I got home, I called one of my brother's ex-girlfriends that I really liked and explained my dilemma. She agreed to go with me and after I thanked her calmly and hung up the phone, I ran screaming through the house. **The end of desperation is bliss.**

My friends pulled me aside at the dance to ask, "who's the mystery woman?" *Wouldn't you like to know? One of these days you boys are going to figure out that I'm something of a mystery man.* And I said it with a straight face.

It's amazing what humans will do when they are desperate. I read about a young man who lifted a tractor to free his father. Some have been willing to self-mutilate for survival, or to jump from burning buildings to avoid the fire. Sheer desperation.

The movie **John Q** was about the father of a young boy who needed a transplant but his insurance wouldn't pay for it. The desperate father finally armed himself and took a surgical team hostage to get the surgery done. It happens in real life too.

The AP reported that a man who lost \$1.4 billion to Bernie Madoff sat down in his Manhattan office and carefully wrote a series of suicide letters to family and friends, then swallowed a fatal dose of pills.

The AP also reported back in May that an Afghan father, unable to feed his family, sold his 11 year old daughter for \$2,000 so he could feed the others in his family.

He told the reporter, "I know people will say I am a cruel and merciless father who sold his own child, but those who say so don't know my hardship and have never felt the hunger that my family suffers."

What would you do to save your family after you had tried everything legal and rational? How far would you go to save your child? None of us know what we would do, but I can tell you from experience, you'll consider most anything.

In today's gospel reading, we meet a desperate father named Jairus. According to our text, **v. 23**, his daughter was **at the point of death**. She was long past feeling bad, far beyond sick or very sick. She was standing at the precipice. For Jairus, that meant there were 2 seconds on the game clock and he had time for one last shot. **Jesus would be his last shot.**

Jairus was not a common Jew like the disciples of Jesus. He was a leader in the synagogue; a rabbi or elder. As such, he would be a fervent and faithful follower of the law and would give deference to the Sanhedrin in difficult matters.

We don't know this from the text, but we know it nonetheless. When our daughters or sons get sick, we take the steps available to us to help them get well. That means this spiritual leader first sought the remedies of his faith. He made prayers and gave offerings for the healing of his little girl. He took her to the mikveh which is a ritual cleansing bath. I don't know if the synagogue had a prayer list, but this leader, like any believing father, asked for the prayers of his faith community.

Either concurrently or soon after this religious approach, Jairus took the girl to the local Jewish physician. It doesn't say it in the text, but we know this happened because no father with love and means would fail to take this step. He did what the man of medicine required and paid him accordingly. Maybe he did like the woman also mentioned in this story and went to several doctors.

But the girl continued to decline and the father continued to get more desperate. Did Jairus dare to seek the help of a Roman physician? It would have been a risky and clandestine move, but desperation knows few boundaries. Jairus was **down to his last shot**.

We know from the text that this daughter had become so ill that she was at death's door. Time was running out. In his irrational state, Jairus pulled out his hair trying to think of what he could do that he had not already done. He had heard of the prophet Jesus. People had reported that Jesus healed the sick.

No, that's ridiculous, Jairus thought. Why would I take my sweet girl to one of these strange prophets and would be messiahs that show up on a regular basis.

There was and still is a grapevine among ministers that allows us to hear about every new thing and every new messiah. The webpages we visit and the articles we read often showcase the minister whose church went from 12 to 1200 in worship in three months; or the one who has written a best-seller or who has moved his church to an arena. And we shake our heads at what people will buy. In the old days it was snake oil and now it's secrets, success, positive thinking and the list goes on.

I suspect that when Jairus heard about Jesus, he rolled his eyes and muttered, "the prophet de jur." When some of his synagogue members came up to him and said, "my cousin told me about this prophet who is making blind people see and lame people walk," Jairus probably smiled and said, "well that's nice," and then under his breath, "how can people be so gullible." He stifled the impulse to go to Jesus.

Maybe he should take his girl to the Jordan and dip her seven times. It worked for the Gentile general Naaman. Or maybe he should try Nehushtan, the bronze serpent on a pole that healed the Hebrews who had been bitten by poisonous snakes in the wilderness when they looked upon it. Time was running out. Jairus had only one shot.

His mind went back to Jesus, who was teaching somewhere in Galilee. He was desperate enough to seek out the prophet, but it would be a huge **political risk**. Jesus was not being well-received by other religious leaders. This is why Nicodemus went to Jesus by night. One did not want to risk the ire of those in high religious places.

I've had conversations with older ministers who wanted to hear MLK preach, but would not go for the same reason Jairus was reluctant. They wanted to hear the man, but knew they would be in a world of trouble with their congregants and their colleagues if they did.

But suddenly, the wife of Jairus came into the room crying. *We can't wake her up. My baby girl is dying. Do something! Do something!*

So Jairus grabbed his tunic and headed for Jesus, **his last shot**. I don't know what time it was for Jesus, but for Jairus it was 11:59 p.m. I don't know much about the hour of power, but I know this was the hour of desperation. Jairus would have gone to a Roman cross to save his girl. He would have faced Goliath without a sword or slingshot.

vv. 22-23. He approached Jesus and in our text we see the desperation up close. Mark reports that he fell at Jesus' feet and begged him **repeatedly**. Do you feel the desperation? Here is a man who falls down only in prayer to God. But he is emotionally spent and he is utterly helpless. I've seen and experienced this collapse and the begging of desperation.

He begs Jesus to come and lay hands on his daughter that she might *be well and live*. The word **be well** is the same term as **be saved**. *Lay hands on my girl so that she will be saved and will have a life*. This is the last shot prayer of Jairus.

Jesus agreed to go with the man and on the way, he encountered another desperate person whom he healed. This raised the hopes of Jairus; hopes that were quickly dashed when messengers from his house came to report that the daughter was dead. Jesus tells Jairus to be not afraid and to believe, but Jesus was numb.

Jesus, Peter, James and John along with the parents, went into the room where this girl was lying. Much debate has gone on about whether the girl was actually dead or not. We can't be certain from the text. Yes, the people tending her thought she died, but they could have been wrong. Jesus said *she's only sleeping*, but he could be speaking literally or metaphorically.

I don't think we need to know the answer. This girl was either dead or was deadly comatose and the point of the story doesn't depend on one or the other.

Mark is highlighting **two very different responses to Jesus**: those who can't believe and those who do; those who aren't desperate and those who are.

When Jesus said the girl was *just sleeping*, those gathered at the house laughed at him. They were the realists who knew death when they saw it and knew what it meant. They scoffed at the notion of a power greater than death. They scoffed at the flesh and blood Son of God.

And then there was Jairus the desperate, who begged and believed something more; who suspended his skepticism for a time; who could not and would not let the cold hard reality of death have its way. This was the response of pure desperation; the **last shot** response.

I heard a SS teacher say that God doesn't honor foxhole or deathbed prayers, but that's not the story here. If you can stand the street language, I commend to you the movie *Gran Torino*, the story of a calloused and unhappy man played by Clint Eastwood. It's a story about someone who could not get right would God for his own sake, but eventually did for the sake of two young Asians who moved in next door. His act of love and sacrifice at the end of the movie was an act of desperation by which two kids were given a new life.

Maybe this is our nature...to turn to God in desperation. Maybe we have to hurt to be humbled. Maybe our defiance needs a powerful dose of desperation before it can become dependent on God. Don't Americans especially have to be broken before we will bow...even to God? Not everyone has to be desperate, but some of us do. Some of us need to be down to our last shot.

You don't have to wait till time is almost gone before you turn to Jesus. You don't really know how much clock you have. And Jesus doesn't have to be your last shot. But this I can say with Jairus. **Whether it's your first or your last shot, come to Jesus, desperation and all, for salvation and life.**