

Fear and Faith

Mark 5:21-43

June 30, 2024

First Presbyterian, Luling

Last week, when we talked about Jesus calming the storm, and calming the disciples, I said briefly that for the Gospel of Mark, the opposite of faith is not doubt. For Mark, the opposite of faith is fear. That's been gnawing on me all week, trying to tease out exactly what that means. I see it in this week's gospel reading too, but before we get there, let's jump back to last week's reading.

The disciples are scared to death, and Jesus is sleeping. They wake him up, he calms the storm, and then he says to them: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" He certainly implies here that if they had had faith, they wouldn't have been afraid. Faith is the antidote, sort of, to fear. And if there's a lot of fear present, there necessarily isn't a lot of faith.

The next episode in the Gospel of Mark, that the lectionary skips, is the story where the man is possessed by unclean spirits so severely that he lives in the cemetery. Jesus casts out the spirits into a herd of pigs, who run off the cliff into the sea. When the townspeople hear what had happened, Mark says "they came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, the very man who had had the legion of spirits. And they were afraid." So the townspeople are witnesses to this healing, which could—or even should—have been something that could strengthen their faith, and instead, they are afraid. The man himself is unafraid and Jesus sends him off to tell his friends what Jesus had done.

Then comes our reading for today. This fear and faith thing is a thread tying all three, really four, stories together. This passage is Mark's most famous "sandwich," where he starts one story, interrupts it with another, and then returns to conclude the first story. In the process, the two intertwined stories affect how we interpret each, compared to how we might interpret them if they were told completely independently.

The bread of this sandwich is the raising of Jairus's daughter. Jairus, a leader in the synagogue, comes to Jesus and repeatedly begs him, just as the man with the unclean spirits had done, to come and lay hands on his daughter to heal her. Jesus starts on his way, and the crowd is all around him, following along. Nothing is said about Jairus's fear, though surely he was afraid, because he tells Jesus his daughter is "at the point of death." Nor is anything said about Jairus's faith,

though again, surely he must have a little bit of faith, or else he wouldn't have come to find Jesus. He trusts, at least a little, that Jesus can heal her. He's also, truth be told, a little desperate.

Then there's the interruption, the jelly of the sandwich, with this woman who has been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years. She maneuvers herself near enough to Jesus in the crowd that she can touch the hem of his garment, because she's told herself that's all it will take to make her well. It works, but she doesn't slip away unnoticed. Jesus feels power leave him, so he turns around to ask "Who touched me?" as if that's a reasonable question to ask in a jostling crowd. But it was her, and she touched him with intent, and she comes forward to confess. She tells him the whole truth. We do hear about both her faith and fear. Like Jairus, she has sufficient faith to believe that Jesus can heal her, and that's why she makes the effort to reach him. And in the end, after she's told Jesus the truth, he says to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well." But she's not without fear. Mark only mentions her fear after Jesus asks who touched him. She comes forward, Mark tells us, with fear and trembling. She falls before him, as Jairus had done, in fear. Yet Jesus says "Your faith has made you well." Another piece of the faith and fear puzzle, but it's not really getting any clearer.

Back to the bread of the sandwich. Meanwhile, Jairus and his friends have gotten impatient, to put it nicely, with the delay. This woman is a nobody, and Jairus is an important guy. She certainly could have waited for healing, but his precious daughter is at the point of death, and one would think that Jesus could hurry a little bit. And sure enough, people come from Jairus's house to tell him the sad news that his daughter had died. Jesus says she's only sleeping, and when he finally arrives at Jairus's house, he enters the room and tells her to get up, the same word as "rising" as in "rising from the dead."

Now we get some clues about Jairus's fear and faith. When the people from home tell Jairus that his daughter has died, Jesus tells him "Do not fear, only believe." We get the sense that this is kind of the way we would say "Keep the faith." Keep on believing, don't let fear overcome.

To take these all together, we have the storm story, where faith is the antidote to fear. And we have the unclean spirits story, where fear of his power drives people away from Jesus. We have Jairus, whose fear threatens to overcome his faith, but the outcome strengthens his faith. And we have the unnamed woman, whose faith compels her to seek out Jesus, and then she confesses that faith in the midst of her fear.

So all that leads me to say that I'm not sure that I was right last week. I'm not convinced that fear is the total opposite of faith. There are of course various ways to understand faith. We could think of faith as belief, something primarily originating in our minds. Or we could think of faith as action, like attending worship or praying or serving our neighbors. Or we could think of faith as trust. All of those are part of faith, certainly. The idea of faith as trust seems most pertinent here. Is fear the opposite of trust? Maybe. Fear can certainly overcome trust, and trust can certainly overcome fear, at least temporarily. But these stories tell us that fear and faith can co-exist.

The disciples are afraid in the storm AND they call on Jesus for help. The townspeople are afraid of Jesus power in casting out the unclean spirits BUT that isn't the end of the of story. Who knows what faith may find them later, as they continue to hear about Jesus and see the lasting change in their neighbor. Jairus has the fear of a desperate father, AND he too trusts enough to turn to Jesus for healing. His fear continues through the story, AND so does his faith. The suffering woman has faith AND even when she's gotten confirmation that she placed her faith in the right person, she's still fearful.

The key, I think, is that when we are afraid, because we are human and we'll be afraid, over and over, is that we know where to turn. We know who it is that we trust. We know who has the power to address the various frightening situations we find ourselves in.

We put our ultimate trust, our faith, in Jesus and not in our fears. While we are fearful, we yet trust in God.