

I

“Mr. Baer, I’m sorry to wake you, but it’s urgent that I speak with you and your wife.”

It was about 1:00 in the morning, but upon hearing these words spoken by a doctor, I was instantly awake. Our twin sons had been born about 24 hours before, and since they were a bit premature, they were in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit just down the hall from Amy’s hospital room.

The doctor explained that one of our newborn sons was in such severe respiratory distress that his right lung had collapsed, and he needed our consent to perform an emergency surgery. I signed the requisite paperwork, and he was gone in a flash.

Amy and I prayed together, and then she asked if I would go down to the NICU and say a prayer over our newborn son. However, when I arrived in the unit, a whole team of doctors and nurses was already busy preparing a sterile surgical field around his little crib, so I couldn’t get anywhere near him. I said a prayer from a distance, and then, not knowing what else to do or where else to go, I left the unit and began to wander the silent, empty hallways of the hospital in the wee hours of the morning.

In ordinary circumstances, I like to think of myself as a man who usually has himself together. I am well-educated, powerful, and wealthy, at least by global standards. But none of that

made for a hill of beans that night. I was completely powerless, and the fate of my newborn son’s life rested in the hands of complete strangers. As I wandered, my eye caught sight of a crucifix at the end of the hall, and as tears streamed down my face, I fell to pieces.

II

And I suspect that maybe I’m not the only one in this room who has had that experience. Most of us, I think, like to think of ourselves as having ourselves together. But sometimes, events transpire and befall us that leave us powerless. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, despite our best plans, the tears stream down our faces, and we find ourselves falling to pieces.

III

In our story today, we’re going to encounter two people who both find that life has just become too much. The grief and the pain have become too heavy. And they both fall to pieces at the feet of Jesus.

This winter and spring, we’ve been making our way through the Gospel According to Mark. Jesus has begun his public ministry in the little villages that line the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, and word has begun to spread about this one who teaches with authority, this one who has the power to cure diseases and heal injuries, who, it’s been said, even has the power to forgive sins.

In our story last week, for the first time, Jesus and the disciples ventured

beyond their hometowns. They crossed the Sea of Galilee to a place called the land of the Gerasenes. But when our story opens this morning, they've come home again, and the crowd is still there ready to greet them. So with that background in mind, I invite you to listen now for a Word from God from Mark 5:21-43.

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" He looked

all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

IV

There are so many things going on in this story, aren't there?

Faith versus doubt. Healing versus illness. Life versus death.

Jesus told the hemorrhaging woman, “Your *faith* has made you well.” And he told Jairus, when it was reported that his daughter had died, “Do not fear, only *believe*.”

And the hemorrhaging stopped. And Jairus’ little girl walked around and ate a snack. And it seems like there’s a simple linear connection between faith and healing, between believing life.

It seems like the message is, if you just have enough faith, your suffering will end. If you just don’t fear and only believe, your grief will turn to joy and amazement.

But much to my disappointment, I have discovered that life doesn’t work that linear pathway. I have known women and men of deep faith who have prayed, who have believed, and yet, they suffered. And yet, they grieved. And yet, they died.

I don’t think the men and women that I know were any more or less faithful or righteous than the hemorrhaging woman or the leader of the synagogue.

So either this text is a nice little story for them that doesn’t really apply to us, or there’s something else going on that requires us to look deeper.

Maybe faith and belief aren’t actually linear and transactional. Maybe faith and belief are complicated, even

messy concepts, that often ebb and flow through the course of our lives.

Maybe the faith that sustains us, the belief that Jesus commends to us, is one that says that suffering and pain and death are all too real, all too capricious, all too seemingly random.

The faith and belief that Jesus commends to the hemorrhaging woman and to Jairus and to you and to me is one that says that Jesus enters right into the middle of that pain, right into the middle of that suffering, right into the middle of the crowd and the house and even into the very room where death has had its way with one whom we have loved.

And faith and belief says yes, this is real. And faith and belief says yes, this hurts. And faith and belief says yes, this doesn’t make any sense. And faith and belief says, because of Jesus, because of who Jesus is, God-with-us, Emmanuel, fear and pain and suffering and grief and death are not the final things, not for the hemorrhaging woman, not for Jairus, not for his daughter, not for you, and not for me. Maybe that’s the messy, complicated, non-linear faith that carries us through even the valley of the shadow of death.

V

Every week, we do something in our worship life together called the Passing of the Peace. It comes right after we’ve confessed to God our sins and heard words of assurance from Scripture. And then we are invited to

share with one another signs of God's peace.

And I'm mindful that you just never know what someone might be going through. You just never know who might be in these pews who is falling to pieces because the pain and the grief and the suffering have become just too much to bear.

And so the passing of the peace isn't just a chance to continue the conversation that was interrupted by the prelude. The passing of the peace is a chance for us to be the body of Christ together – to see, to touch, to love those who may be falling to pieces around us.

I'm also mindful that it's entirely possible that that moment of the passing of the peace, when you look someone in the eye, when you really look at them, and you reach out your hand and touch them gently, and you offer them a word of comfort and welcome, that might be the only time in the previous seven days that they've been looked in the eye. That might be the only time in the previous seven days that they've been spoken to with a gentle word or touched in an appropriate way.

So let us be the church together. Let us be a place where we can be honest enough to admit that while we do our best to love God with our minds, we don't have all the answers. Let us be a place where we put on our Sunday best out of love and reverence and respect, but where we are also willing to be vulnerable and honest with one another about the pain and suffering that we

bear. Let us be a place where we are not just a social network or a non-profit organization, but the church, which is the body of Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.