

Sermon for Sunday 27th June 2021

Bruce McCready

Risk of Faith; Generosity & Patience

2 Cor 8:7-end Mark 5:21-end

I remember hearing the story of Jairus' daughter when I was a child at Sunday School. Whenever I heard the ending, "give her something to eat", my first thought was always - a Mars bar.

It would be strange in the extreme if they had Mars bars in Jesus' day, but of course what she was given to eat was not the issue. The fact that she had been healed, and was now able to eat, was the issue.

Here we have two Bible passages, both fairly well known, both covering different topics, but there are two themes I would like us to explore through both of these readings.

The first is this: risks of faith - or if you prefer, faith is a risky business.

The second is this: generosity & patience - or if you prefer, being generous in your patience as well as generous in what you give.

Let's dive straight into the first theme - risks of faith, and let's start by looking at the bleeding woman.

Men cannot really comprehend what women go through when it comes to menstrual bleeding. For some, it is a minor thing. For others, it can be very painful, with cramps, aches, acne, hormones raging, and all of these and more anywhere from nought to eleven on the Richter scale. It's fairly safe to say that this woman's suffering was at the high end of the scale, and it had been going on for a long time.

Twelve years. Just think about that for a moment. Twelve years of severe discomfort. No let-up. No pain-killers. No help. Not only that, but what the doctors of the time gave her kept making her worse. So, at the end of the twelve years, she is actually suffering more than she was at the beginning. Depressed? Wouldn't you be?

That's just the physical side. That sort of bleeding would have made her ritually unclean, so no-one would want to go near her, otherwise they might become unclean themselves. Imagine her emotional state. Imagine yours, if no-one would go near you. She would have been unable to bear children and so would have been unmarried, or divorced, so her income would have been very small. What little she did have was taken by the doctors.

So here we have someone who is probably destitute, maybe homeless, seen as unclean and definitely suffering - both physically and emotionally. Desperate doesn't begin to describe it.

So, she takes a risk and goes to see Jesus. Why is it a risk? Several reasons. One, she would be in a crowd. If anyone found out that she was unclean, things might have become nasty. Second, no guarantee (from her perspective) that Jesus would want to heal her. When Jesus realises that the healing has occurred, she takes another risk, that of coming forward and telling her story. At this point, the crowd learns her situation, and could well have been unhappy with her - had she made them unclean? Again, it could have turned nasty. So, she took a number of risks to see Jesus, but those risks paid off. Risks of faith - and her faith made her well.

Jairus was also a risk taker.

As an official in the local synagogue, he was expected to toe the official line, and the official line was, Jesus means trouble. Yet, not only did he go and speak to Jesus, he expressed faith in him and asked him to heal his daughter.

How sick must his daughter have been, for him to take such a risk? At death's door. Some of us here know what it is like to see someone we love literally at death's door. Heartache. Anguish. Doubt.

He goes to see Jesus. He could have been stripped of his job for that. His daughter was more important than his job, and his faith in Jesus was what made him take the risk. Again, a risk of faith - and his faith made his daughter well.

Now, let's look at Paul.

Paul's relationship with the Corinthians had been a rocky one. Over the course of a number of visits and letters, some of which survive in what we now call 1 & 2 Corinthians, he had been dealing with a number of problems in the Corinthian church. In some cases he has had to reprimand them quite severely because of their actions and attitudes. This was risky because they could well have washed their hands of him, yet they had taken stock of their relationship with both God and Paul. In this passage, we can see that Paul is very happy with the way that they are right now. His risks have paid off, to the benefit of the Church as a whole - after all, not only had the Corinthian church improved, but they were now in a position to help the wider church with their gifts.

Paul's risk of faith - has paid off.

Now, Titus.

Titus has also been involved with the Corinthians for a long time, and so he has shared Paul's risks regarding them. He has also been travelling a lot with Paul, and at this point is going to Corinth to take part in the exercise of giving.

Today, we make most journeys virtually certain of getting to our destinations both intact and, usually, on time. For Titus and the others, there was no guarantee of getting there at all. He could have been delayed, attacked, robbed, murdered, at any time or place along his way. Even assuming he gets there safely, it would still have been a long, hard journey - probably on foot, at best on a horse, over roads and tracks ranging from passable to treacherous. Any journey was a risk, but for the work of Christ Titus was happy to take those risks.

Titus' risks of faith - paying off.

So, we can see that faith had its risks then, in Bible times, but what about now? Is faith still a risky business?

In a word, yes.

In some parts of the world admitting you are a Christian can mean an immediate bullet to the brain - or worse. Even in this country, admitting faith can result in being estranged from family and friends. Some people have lost jobs in the struggle between their faith and their work.

So, faith is definitely still a risky business. Does it pay off? Yes, it does. We may not always see the payoff, but there always is one. Part of having faith is trusting that God knows what he is doing, and that even the darkest situation can be turned around by God.

Psalm 23, verse four:

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

The payoff is summarised in verses five and six:

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

So, faith is indeed risky, but risks of faith pay off, both in Bible times, throughout history, today and even into our futures.

Well, we've looked at risks of faith, so let's have a look at our second theme: generosity & patience.

Mark 5:21 tells us that a large crowd was there. In verse 24 it says that "they were crowding him on every side".

How many of you have worked in London? Imagine you are on a packed train pulling into a crowded terminal. The train is late, of course, so everyone is in a hurry. People pour off of the train and into the London Underground. People are pushing and shoving to get onto the tube train. You are trying to make sure that none of your stuff gets nicked. Maybe someone is with you, and you are trying to avoid getting separated. You just want to get on with it, and get out of there, right?

The disciples probably felt the same way about the crowd they were in. They have a job to do, places to go, and the crowd is simply getting in the way. Jesus stops and asks who touched him. You can almost hear the disciples exasperation:

"You see how the people are crowding you; why do you ask who touched you?"

Yet, Jesus is patient. He knows the difficulty in finding the person he seeks. He knows that they are on the clock, with a dying child to reach. Nonetheless, he wants to speak to the woman who had such faith that she risked everything to reach him. He is patient with her (and with his disciples, who just want to hurry along, and with the crowd, who are all around him). He is generous with his time, and with his healing.

They move on towards Jairus house. Jesus didn't have to go to Jairus house. He had just come back across the lake, and may well have been quite tired at this point from the crossing. He didn't have to go, but he chose to. He his generosity, as well as his compassion, resulted in him choosing to go and heal Jairus' daughter.

When the messengers come and tell Jairus that his little girl is dead, Jairus would have been in quite a state. I know I would be. Jesus is patient with him, and with the messengers, and they carry on. Note that Jesus doesn't allow many to go on with them - only a few, so the crowd would have had to stay behind as well. This further demonstrates Jesus' patience and compassion: the last thing that Jairus needed just then was a crowd of people.

Likewise, when they reach the house, he gets rid of the those there, taking only the child's parents and his three disciples with him. This was to be a private, family moment, without the mourners messing things up. Jesus gives the family space to be themselves, and gives them back their daughter - alive and well. Generosity, compassion and patience are the hallmarks of Jesus in this passage.

This is far from the only time that Jesus is generous with his time and his healing, in fact, healing is probably the most common miracle associated with his time on earth.

Onwards, to Paul and Titus.

Paul, having been patient with the Corinthian church during their previous struggles, is now generous in his praise of them. Verse 7:

"You are so rich in all you have"

Paul himself has been very generous with the Corinthians, giving them much time, prayer and encouragement. He has, you might say, "donated" his time and effort to them, making his own living as a tent maker instead of asking them to support him.

Titus, too, has been generous and patient with them, going back and forth between Corinth and Paul a number of times, at much risk to himself as already discussed.

Paul encourages the Corinthian church members to be generous in their own giving, to "finish now what you began last year", verse 10. To have the patience to see it through. Verse 11:

"Be as eager to finish it as you were to plan it, and do it with what you now have."

Therefore we, too, should be generous and patient. Generous - give what we have, and joyfully. Remember the story of the widow who could only give a little, but Jesus announced it was worth much more than the bigger gift of the one who had plenty. This is echoed here in 2 Corinthians 8:12:

"If you are eager to give, God will accept your gift on the basis of what you have to give, not on what you don't have."

It's not about exact amounts. It's not even solely about money, although that is a major part of it. It's about willingness, willingness to be generous.

Likewise, we must be generous with our patience.

I always remember, from my university days, a window sticker with a definition of stress:

Stress is the confusion created when one's mind overrides the body's basic desire and instinct to *strangle* the living *daylights* out of some *idiot* who *deliberately asks for it!*

We could reverse that definition:

Patience is the state of mind when we overcome our potential annoyance and help someone anyway.

How many times have you cursed at the lorry overtaking in front of you? Perhaps we should be patient, and remember that they might be in a hurry as well.

Or, complained about something in church, work or school that you felt wasn't quite right? Perhaps we should be patient with people, as they are only human too - even managers are human!

Patience and generosity are vital characteristics in a Christian, in fact they even appear in some lists of the gifts of the Spirit. Therefore, it is important that we practice them, and it is only through practice, i.e. doing, that we will improve.

So, to conclude, faith can indeed be a risky business, but God will always be there for us and our ultimate destination is certain.

"Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Likewise we must remember patience and generosity, as Jesus demonstrated so often in his time on earth. As God in heaven is generous and patient with us, so we must be with each other - those we know and those we don't. Those we like, and those we don't.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable and pleasing in Your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.