

Over and over again in the gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we read how people flocked to Jesus’ side. It seems as though whether they could get close to him or just be able to see him from afar, people just wanted to be in Jesus’ presence. Jesus taught in a boat because the crowds filled the beach. Zacchaeus climbed a tree to be able to get a glimpse. What a sight it must have been to see. What an experience it must have been to be a part of.

Given what we know about Jesus, who he was and the things he taught and the actions he embodied, wouldn’t you have flocked to Jesus? Wouldn’t you have wanted to travel around and follow him? Something I think we might want to ponder is whether we flock to Jesus like we flock to sporting events, concerts, festivals, and restaurants?

In thinking of this I am reminded of the excitement youth have in getting into Anderson Auditorium for keynote and worship experiences at Montreat Youth Conferences. Groups send representatives early to camp out by doors so they can be the first one’s in. And even those who aren’t first, push to get in the door to see, and experience what is about to unfold. For a passerby looking on from the edge without any knowledge, they must wonder simply that there must be something unforgettable and amazing inside those doors for all those youth to be doing that. And don’t you think they would want to just go in and see?

Why? Why did people flock to Jesus? For the same reasons the youth flocked into Anderson Auditorium. Because Jesus, and what Jesus is about, is LIFE GIVING. No offense to sporting events, concerts, festivals, and restaurants, I like them too, but what they offer us is nothing, nothing compared to what Jesus comes to offer us. What Jesus comes to give is life and life abundantly.

The woman in Mark’s story proclaims, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” Another way we can read this is, “If I can only connect with God, I will have life!” A quick note to say that the “well” the woman is referring to is not just a physically healing but a fulfilling of peace or well-being or wholeness or restoration.

The story we read here highlights the woman’s longing, but I don’t think the woman was the only one saying that. I think Jairus was thinking it as well on behalf of his daughter. I think everyone who was present in the crowd was thinking some form of what she said, “If we can only connect with God, our lives would be changed, transformed, renewed, better, fulfilled!”

The good news, great news, for us is that we can. We can connect with God and in our connecting, abiding, remaining with God comes life, true life, life abundant. God is life. God is

life giving. God, the maker of the heavens and the earth, is the one who created order out of chaos and gave purpose to living things. God, the source of breath, is the one who indwelt that breath into the bodies of humanity to make life possible as we know it and experience it daily. True life with God means purpose, belonging, identity, worth, hope, strength, power, grace, love, opportunity, and more.

Now, I don't know about you, but I believe these are the real things that make up the good life, right? The things only God can provide and does provide in abundance out of love for us.

It is hard though because we are tempted with so many other things that the world and culture sell to us as "the good life." If you listen to country music, the good life is defined by owning dirt, settling down with the love of your life, having babies, drinking a cold one, line dancing on Saturday night, and praising God on Sunday morning. I might have missed owning a chevy pickup truck. In other temptations, the good life is defined as being young and physically fit, having enough money to do what you want, having a secure retirement plan, having other kids at school like you and think you are cool or pretty or fun to be around, and a whole slew of other things. At the top of many of our lists defining a "good life" may be health. Did you know that the World Health Organization defines health as complete physical, mental, and social well-being? My question to them is where is the spiritual element to health? I am just saying that because God is life, God should be considered in that equation of health. Look, many of these things are fun and enjoyable and I am not saying they aren't good for those who can experience them. What I am trying to share is that these things are not for everyone, and they don't mean the same thing for everyone. We can all spend time defining and writing up the perfect recipe of these things to make up our definition of a "good life." I believe though, when the rubber meets the road, that only things of God-purpose, belonging, identity, worth, hope, strength, power, grace, love- are necessarily present for true life, or the good life, for all. And I believe this because it is these things that come together to make up life abundantly, beyond cultural conditioning for sure but also beyond circumstantial conditioning.

Several notes poured out of this story in Mark help to support this claim.

One of the things this text in Mark reveals is that all members of society are worthy of care, blessing, and community. How so? The story includes two main characters outside Jesus and the crowd. One is Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, who was fortunate to have authority and a wealth of resources at his disposal. It was his daughter that was thought to be dead. After Jairus had exhausted all of his resources and things were not any better, it was then he went to Jesus. The other main character is the hemorrhaging woman, who had been ill for twelve years, cast aside because ritual laws prevented her access to conventional society because of ritual impurity. The woman had gone to everyone she could and exhausted all of her

resources, which were far less than Jairus' mind you. She was still not any better and therefore willing to risk even Jesus for the hope she might be healed. Her touching Jesus would have, according to their belief, made Jesus unclean as well. The representation of Jairus with his societal status on one end and the woman with her societal status on the other end works to encompass and express hope for all members of society: for you and me and our family members and friends and those pushed to every margin of society possible. I believe God wants us all to know that what Jairus and the woman were longing for, which in my understanding was "life", is available for us all. I don't believe God picks and chooses. I believe God is a God of life for all who come to God in love.

Another thing this text in Mark makes clear is what it is that gave them life. It wasn't the authority and resources they had that made things better for Jairus and the woman. This is not to say doctors don't help contribute to life, because they absolutely do. I believe most medicine and doctors are gifts from God to help better our lives. Ultimately, the life given to Jairus' daughter (including the new life Jairus would have as well) and to the woman was experience through their faith in God and Jesus. God was willing and ready, and faith activated the experience.

Jesus said in the story, "Do not fear, believe and depend on me." The woman had suffered for twelve years, and her brokenness taught her to depend (trust) in something other than herself.

I want to be clear about something. I have heard this story used to defend comments such as, "If only your faith was stronger, you wouldn't be sick anymore. If only your faith was stronger, you wouldn't be going through such a hard time. If only your faith was stronger, your loved one wouldn't have died." I think that is hog wash. One author writes, "Faith is not a finite resource." Faith in God is not a board game that gets used and then put away until next time. Faith can be conditioned by circumstance, often made stronger in our struggles and trials, but it is not to be conditional on whether we get what we want as an outcome. The apostle Paul experienced great persecution and hardship during his life of faith and witness and in the end what he passes along to his protégé Timothy is powerful. Paul declares, "I have fought the good fight, finished the race, and I have kept the faith (2 Timothy 4:7)." Life is a fight we must fight and a race we must run, but it is keeping the faith that is most paramount, for it is keeping the faith that taps us into true life with God defined by far more than our earthly or circumstantial conditions.

Another point this text in Mark raises for our consideration is at what point do we turn to God in faith? In the example of Jairus, it was at the point of death for his daughter. In the example of the woman, it was after twelve years. What these examples tell us is that death is no match for the life God gives. Because of God, Jairus' daughter, even when she was believed to be at the point of death, was not only preserved in a mummy state, but given new life in fullness.

Twelve years of being cast aside and unclean is no match for the life God gives. Because of God, the woman was not only healed of her physical ailment but walked away in peace. She truly had been made well. These examples are meant to relay to us the assurance that God is a God who is able and willing to be life giving even when time seems to be running out to the very last drop. We can have hope and assurance that nothing is impossible with God. We can't be certain it will happen personally and physically for all who are longing for that, but indeed it does happen. I have grown to believe that for those it doesn't happen for- meaning they are not cured of a disease or saved from death- there must be a greater meaning beyond our comprehension or understanding. Be assured that will be one of the first questions I hope to ask God over a cup of coffee in heaven.

The healing and restoration that takes place in Mark's story points us to more than personal or physical healing. Perhaps one of the most underattended to elements of this text in Mark is the foundational message of social reintegration and the importance social interaction, or community relationship, plays in life. Nine of twelve individuals whom Jesus heals have conditions that are potential cause of exclusion in society. Therefore, it is worth us paying good attention to. Jesus' act of healing and life-giving reveals to us God's desire for us, all of us, to be apart, involved, included. If God's desire is for us all to be one community, then we must ask ourselves what we are doing, and maybe not doing, to help make that one community happen. Are we present? Are we participating? Are we giving? Are we serving? Are we loving? Are we welcoming? Are we accepting? Community in its most pure form provides strength to individuals and opportunity to belong and participate in something bigger than the individual. And make no mistake, the restoring of individuals to community also gives restorative life to the community as a whole.

There is not just a balm in Gilead, but a balm right here, that makes the wounded whole, heals the sin sick soul, encourages the discouraged and revives the soul again. God is the balm of our lives right here, for Jesus is our friend and rock and refuge and salvation, saying "Do not fear, believe and depend on me," and I will make you well.

Let all God's people say... Amen.