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Brian Morgan

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# GOD'S NEW FAMILY: BOSTON STRONG

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

One of the deepest longings in the human soul is the need to belong. Everyone wants to belong to a family, to a community, and to a nation. That need is getting a lot of attention these days because our world is becoming so fragmented and violent that there are fewer and fewer families and communities where belonging is safe. As a nation we lived through the unspeakable horror of Newtown, where an elementary was turned into a bleeding Bosnia. And just when we thought spring had arrived and we could begin to heal from our national wounds, two brothers brought an entire city to its knees in despicable violence, tearing gaping holes in families no surgeon could mend. President Obama found himself at yet another memorial service addressing more than 2000 mourners who packed the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston. A common theme of the memorial was the adamant refusal to cave in to fear. “Rabbi Ronne Friedman of Temple Israel, the city’s largest synagogue, quoted a Hasidic sage, “The entire world is a narrow bridge, but the important principle is to transcend, somehow, your fear.”<sup>1</sup>

The question remains: how do we transcend our fears? The answer the Bible gives is “faith.” Faith is what trumps our fears, but it cannot be a blind or an uninformed faith, as many today attempt to naively exhort us in the midst of tragedy— “Just have faith.” But faith in what? The answer comes, “Just have faith in faith.” By contrast our faith rests in a person, God himself, who is trustworthy and has made very real and specific commitments to us, ones that you can hang our life on.

Developing a faith that overcomes fear has been the dominant theme in Luke 8. In the parable of the sower Jesus taught that faith is more than intellectual assent; it must be acted on in order to take root and grow. Therefore all faith must be tested to become genuine. Last week we discovered that Jesus leads us into storms that can be fearful and life threatening in order to test the quality of our faith. As human beings we experience all kinds of “storms,” but these particular ones are instigated by the Devil, who becomes terrified of Jesus landing on his turf in order to set his captives free and expand God’s rule there. In the hopes of thwarting the new venture, the Devil creates raging storms of intimidation.

On this occasion the Devil almost succeeded, as the terror of the storm all but drowned the disciples’ faith. Fortunately, Jesus took command of the situation and with a word calmed the storm; but not without leaving a stinging rebuke in his wake— “Where is your faith?”

Once on shore the disciples learned firsthand that a legion of demons was no match for Jesus. Jesus drowned the demons in the bottom of the sea, but fear gripped the city when they discovered that the land had been cleansed of its idolatry; they had lost their main source of income. By contrast, the demoniac became an icon of faith and obediently followed Jesus’ command and went through the cities of the Decapolis unashamedly declaring to all what Jesus had done for him.

In today’s text Jesus will confront our greatest fear: death. And it is the worst kind of death, the one that every parent dreads—the death of a child. It was the news that made Boston inconsolable in its grief this week. The thought of an 8-year-old boy eagerly waiting with his

family to see the runners cross the finish line of the Boston Marathon, then suddenly being ripped off the planet, is an abomination that staggers belief. As a parent, I can’t even imagine it, let alone enter into it. But Jesus can and did. Our text today doesn’t promise to take away the pain, but it does offer a way to go on and a hope to transcend it. This is the story of God’s new family.

## I. A Distraught Father

**Now when Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed him, for they were all waiting for him. And there came a man named Jairus, who was a ruler of the synagogue. And falling at Jesus’ feet, he implored him to come to his house, for he had an only daughter, about twelve years of age, and she was dying. As Jesus went, the people pressed around him. (Luke 8:41-42 ESV)**

The setting and tone of this scene is set in dramatic contrast to the one previous. Rebuffed by the city and townspeople on the eastern shore of Galilee, Jesus returns to Jewish soil on the western shore and is welcomed by a large crowd. From the midst of that large crowd a prominent leader in the Capernaum community emerges. He is a “ruler of the synagogue,” a member of the governing body (perhaps synonymous to the elders of PBCC) that had the responsibility for the supervision of the synagogue and overseeing the arrangements for its services. His Hebrew name, Jairus, means “he will *arouse*” or “*awaken*,” a subtle preview of what is to come.

Jairus is filled with anxiety for his daughter, and at the first sight of Jesus he casts all dignity aside and falls at Jesus’ feet. With grief-stricken urgency he pleads with Jesus for the life of his precious little girl, who is at death’s door. Our empathy is heightened by the fact this was his only child, a daughter. Joel Green adds, “At twelve years of age, she was at the point of puberty, near the age of betrothal and preparation for marriage, and she was dying.”<sup>2</sup> There had been enough evidence around Galilee to convince this Jew that if Jesus would but come and lay his hands on her, she could be saved from her affliction. It must have been an amazing sight to see a ruler of the synagogue falling at the feet of this carpenter and entreating him with such passion for things for which a Jew would only entreat Israel’s God at the temple.

The situation of Jairus’ daughter is so critical that Luke records no verbal response from Jesus. Jesus simply takes off with Jairus as if in an ambulance focused on rescuing its victim. But as Jesus and Jairus make their way to Jairus’ home, they quickly run into a traffic jam. The multitudes “press in” (*sympnigō* – “to choke, strangle”) on him from every side, posing a threat to Jesus’ mission. Luke’s vocabulary is identical to the parable of sower, where some seed was “choked” by the thorns (8:7). The image suggests that Jairus’ faith is being tested.

## II. A Desperate Woman (Luke 8:43-48)

### A. Just one touch

And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and though she had spent all her living on physicians, she could not

be healed by anyone. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, and immediately her discharge of blood ceased. (vv. 43-44)

As Jesus and Jairus make their way through the throngs pressing in on them, there is another victim of circumstance seeking Jesus' aid, an unnamed woman. The lengthy description of the woman interrupts the journey and causes us to linger long over her condition. Here in that surging crowd was a woman who had been crippled by some sort of menstrual disorder for (or "from") twelve years. John Carroll observes that the preposition *apo* may be translated "from [the age of] twelve years [onward]" (implying her whole adult life), or "for twelve years" (the entire life of Jairus' daughter). The ambiguity links the woman to Jairus' daughter more "closely than Mark, not just with the number twelve but also with the shared experience of illness that struck when they were the same age."<sup>3</sup>

In the process she had spent all her wealth searching for a cure, but her condition only grew worse, not to mention the agonizing humiliation at the hands of physicians. Not only was she physically hampered and psychologically humiliated, but far worse, the cleanliness laws regarding menstrual impurity (Lev 15:19-33) rendered her unclean as long her condition lasted. Her bed was unclean, her garments unclean, anything she sat on became unclean, and anyone with whom she had contact became unclean. Being unclean, she was cut off from all community and worship: twelve years of pain, humiliation and isolation. Placing her in our world, we would not have seen her in church since 2001.

I never understood the power of uncleanness until I became attentive to the stories of women who had suffered sexual abuse. As I listened to them, I discovered it wasn't the life-threatening danger that lived on to haunt them, but the shame of uncleanness that the violation left in its wake—a shame that seemed to wall them up in silence and seclusion, and then re-enter the privacy of their locked souls unannounced, with no invitation, and relentlessly torment them day and night in the reenactment of the horror.

The detailed description of the woman draws us into her story, evoking empathy and sorrow for her pained plight. But be careful how deeply you look, for you may find yourself gazing at your own reflection in the mirror. Luke tells us that her condition had been going on for twelve years and the vocabulary used to describe her impurity is similar to Isaiah's description of Israel's uncleanness that brought on her exile:

We have all become like one who is *unclean*,  
and all our righteous deeds are like a *polluted garment*;  
We all fade like a leaf,  
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.  
There is no one who calls on your name,  
who *arouses* himself to *take hold* of you;  
for you have hidden your face from us,  
and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.  
(Isa 64:6-7)

The term for "polluted garment" refers to a garment from a woman's menstrual flow of blood. Is this Luke's way of saying that the woman's uncleanness is symbolic of the impurity of all Israel (and by implication all of us)? Perhaps, for the last two verbs, "arouse" and "to take hold of," prefigure our story of Jairus, who will "*arouse*" himself to find Jesus, and the woman, who "*will take hold of*" his garment. The woman's bold initiative that pushes beyond every conceivable religious and cultural boundary is an incredible act of faith. As Joel Green describes,

Just as the Gerasene demoniac had dwelled among the dead, so this woman exists outside the boundaries of the socially alive in her community. The press of the crowds guarantees that she will infect others with her impurity, and her aim to touch Jesus is a premeditated act that will pass her uncleanness on to him. What is it that motivates her to risk the rebuff of the crowds, of the synagogue rule, and of Jesus on account of her social impropriety? This is the story of her resolution to cross the borders of legitimate behavior to gain access to divine power.<sup>4</sup>

She has faith in the holiness residing in Jesus that just one touch of the fringe of his garment will make her clean. This is a new development in theology for Israel, a vision glimpsed from afar by the prophets (Hag 2:11-19). Rather than Jesus being made unclean by the touch of her uncleanness, his holiness is so powerful it will make her clean. With the coming of Jesus as our High Priest, a new age has been inaugurated where holiness is intensified so that just one touch of the Holy makes the foulest clean. This has tremendous implications for how we live as Christians. We should not live in fear that the world might infiltrate the church and defile us; rather, the world should fear the invasion of believers making everything we touch holy.

The woman carefully works her way through the jostling crowd and sneaks up behind Jesus, praying not to be noticed. Inching closer and closer, finally within arms' reach, she stretches out her hand and grabs the fringe of Jesus' prayer shawl. Immediately a warm sensation shoots through her body, an electric shock of life and love stops the flow of her bleeding. However, though her physical problem may be cured, she is not yet completely healed.

#### B. Everything stops!

And Jesus said, "Who was it that touched me?" When all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the crowds surround you and are pressing in on you!" But Jesus said, "Someone touched me, for I perceive that power has gone out from me." (vv. 45-46)

To our surprise the effect of the cure is felt not only by the patient, but also by the physician. Jesus seeks her out, not to make the miracle known, but to perfect the imperfect faith of the one who had touched him. Jesus does not want to heal or help someone without sealing the relationship with the one in question. And he is never too busy or in too great a hurry to deal with us, for our relationship to him is more important than solving the problems we bring.

Jesus abruptly stops his mission and asks, "Who touched me?" Like children caught with their hands in the cookie jar, there is a tense moment of guilt followed by insistent denial. Finally, Peter attempts to resolve the tension by stating the obvious, but unfortunately doesn't bring them any closer to enlightenment. Yes, many were touching him, but only one touch had faith. How often has Jesus been in our midst, but we failed to reach out to take hold of him in faith?

#### C. A new daughter is born

And when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before him declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; ("saved you") go in peace." (vv. 47-48)

Now that her cover is gone and her deed discovered, the woman is overcome with anxiety and fear. She has done the unthinkable and fully expects to be reprimanded by Jesus and condemned by the crowd, who must now undergo the rites of purification (Lev 15:27). But it doesn't happen. A look of love and acceptance in Jesus' eyes overcomes her fear and frees her to cast herself at his feet and tell all. Instead of remaining hidden, or having her faith strangled by the disgrace of the

crowd, she comes out into the light of day and “in the presence of all the people” reveals everything.

She holds nothing back, nothing of her affliction, her resolve, her touch, and finally her healing. Twelve years of pain and impurity instantly cured with just one touch. Just as Jesus had spoken in earlier parable, “For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light” (8:17).

With that confession her faith survives the test and she becomes a member of God’s new family. Jesus grants her the title “Daughter.” A privileged title, as she is the only person in the gospels that Jesus addresses as “Daughter.” Jesus explains that it was her faith, now tested and proven genuine, that has granted her entrance into the family of God—“your faith has saved you, go in peace.” The shame that once secluded and silenced her now vanishes like dew in the heat of day. Her one touch of faith has granted her salvation, *shalom*, and all the privileges that membership in God’s family affords. Having been restored and freed by divine grace, she is now able to live “in peace” far from the madding crowd.

But while Jesus’ sensitive and attentive response to her touch brings her immeasurable blessing, it leaves Jairus with no little anxiety. Imagine riding in an ambulance as it speeds to the hospital carrying your daughter, and suddenly the driver stops to give aid to another accident victim. Every minute would seem like an eternity as the life of your daughter hangs in the balance.

### III. A Dead Daughter? (Luke 8:49-55)

#### A. Will fear trump faith?

**While he was still speaking, someone from the ruler’s house came and said, “Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the Teacher any more.” But Jesus on hearing this answered him, “Do not fear; only believe, and she will be well.”** (vv. 49-50)

Before Jesus had finished conversing with the woman a messenger from Jairus’ home came with the worst possible news. It is a parent’s worst nightmare, “Your daughter has died; why trouble the Teacher anymore?” The situation would have been beyond hope had Jesus been just a “teacher.”

But Jesus overhears the question and encourages the synagogue official to be like the woman. Do not allow fear to trump faith. For just as the length and severity of her suffering caused her to push her faith beyond all limits to lay hold of what the prophets had promised—which was life from the age to come—so now Jairus must do the same. She believed that just one touch of Jesus’ garment could make her clean; Jairus must believe that just one touch can raise the dead. This is not some fly-by-night wish or ephemeral dream; it was Isaiah’s promise of what would happen after Israel came out of exile. And Jesus expects Jairus of all people to have faith in the Hebrew Scriptures, whose readings he oversees in the synagogue each and every Sabbath.

#### B. Faith’s view of death

**And when he came to the house, he allowed no one to enter with him, except Peter and John and James, and the father and mother of the child. And all were weeping and mourning for her, but he said, “Do not weep, for she is not dead but sleeping. And they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead.** (vv. 51-53)

Jesus then separates from the crowd, taking only the parents of the little girl and three disciples, Peter, James and John, to follow. They find Jairus’ home in an uproar, overrun with grief, emotion and loud wailing. Jesus comes in and with a word calms the sea of emotion with just a word: “Do not weep, for she is not dead [she is alive], but

sleeping [and will wake up].” But he hasn’t even seen the girl. How can he make a diagnosis? The incredulous mourners, knowing that the child is really dead, mock him with laughter.

#### C. Victory over death

**But taking her by the hand he called, saying, “Child, arise.” And her spirit returned, and she got up at once. And he directed that something should be given her to eat. And her parents were amazed, but he charged them to tell no one what had happened.** (vv. 51-53)

In the face of their mocking laugh, Jesus immediately takes command of the situation. He enters the room of the little girl and takes the dead girl by the hand, “crossing the boundary between life and death, between purity and impurity.”<sup>5</sup> With just one touch and two words, “child arise,” he raises her from the dead. Her cure is as immediate as the hemorrhaging woman.

Jesus orders that Jairus’ daughter be given food to strengthen her recovery and as a sign and seal of her restoration within the family. The home that was flooded with grief is now filled with amazement. It is the same astonishment that overcame the disciples when Jesus calmed the sea. Unlike the Gerasene demoniac and the woman in this story, Jesus commands these witnesses to secrecy. A difficult task given that she is the daughter of a well-known public figure. But Jesus is insistent, for the crowd is already dangerously close to crushing him and the report of such a miracle would multiply his following for all the wrong reasons.

### IV. Confronting our Fear of Death

#### i. Who is this Jesus?

Mark, who loves to recreate the vividness of a scene, preserves the Aramaic original of Jesus’ words, “*Talitha koum*” (“little girl arise”) when he raised Jairus’ daughter (Mark 5:41). *Talitha* is an affectionate term that means “little girl” or “lamb.” It is found in poetic description of Israel’s future shepherd described in Isaiah 40. After the exile, Zion is told to release all her fears and announce to all the cities of Judah the good news that her God is about to appear.

**Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,  
and his arm rules for him;  
behold, his reward is with him,  
and his recompense before him.  
He will tend his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms;  
he will carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead those that are with young.** (Isa 40:10-11)

The description of the Lord’s appearance will be like the first Exodus, where he demonstrated his holiness in the perfect balance of strength and tenderness. He manifested his omnipotent power by crushing Pharaoh and his idols in ten plagues. But with his people, he was a compassionate and faithful shepherd, who led his people like a flock and carried the suckling lambs in his arms. As we reflect on our last two stories, the gospel writers are declaring that the future shepherd which Israel so longed for has now arrived in Jesus. His majestic power was demonstrated over the oppressive demons by casting them into the sea, and now, like a shepherd he has gathered his little lamb into his arms.

But God wasn’t satisfied with just bringing about a New Exodus. Isaiah expands God’s promises and explains the New Exodus is just the beginning of a whole New Creation.

**“For behold, I create new heavens  
and a new earth,**

and the former things shall not be remembered  
or come into mind.  
I will rejoice in Jerusalem  
and be glad in my people;  
no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping  
and the cry of distress.  
No more shall there be in it  
an infant who lives but a few days...  
Before they call I will answer;  
while they are yet speaking I will hear.”

(Isa 65:17, 19-20a, 24)

Before Jairus called Jesus, God had already answered. The raising of Jairus' daughter and her restoration to her family is a preview of what Jesus will do for every son and daughter in the resurrection of the New Heavens and New Earth. Knowing Jesus won't keep you from death, or from pain. But Jesus has provided a way through death and out the other side to a New Heavens and New Earth. In 1998 my friend Ed Melinat captured the heart of this truth in a poem he wrote for his daughter on the day of her baptism, entitled *Talitha Koum*. I'll never forget the opening and closing lines.

*Talitha koum,*

Little Girl, arise.

I say to you, little girl, arise!

So today  
my child  
know that death will never touch you  
Oh, you'll know pain and  
sorrow, too  
And it will take your breath away  
But you will never die.  
So, Talitha koum  
Arise!

This is the hope we have in confronting that dreaded demon of death.

## 2. How do we enter the New Creation?

The answer is we enter in by faith. This faith is born in Jairus and the woman through the agonizing means of delay and death. For the woman, the delay consisted of twelve years of waiting and spending all she had. For Jairus, the delay was but a few moments, but those few moments seemed like an eternity to a waiting father whose daughter was just a breath away from death.

Delay caused both the woman and Jairus to abandon hope in the world and cast themselves at the feet of Jesus as their high priest for a new creation. For Jairus, there was no hope left in the synagogue or the temple; and for the woman, there wasn't any money left, nor or a physician who had not abused her. The woman came to Jesus trusting in his holiness, that one touch would make her clean, and the laws that once excluded her would now be obsolete. Jairus would need even more faith, to follow Jesus into the grave and out the other side, if there was any hope of his daughter to arise and walk in newness of life.

This is how we enter in to this new creation: it is when we lose hope in the world to restore our lives, repair our despair, or cleanse our shame. At that critical moment, when there is no earthly hope left, the gift of faith to trust Jesus for a new creation is mysteriously born. As Paul affirms, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Cor 5:17 TNIV).

## 3. What happens as result of this New Creation?

If we look carefully at the exquisite tapestry of our story, we discover that it ends not with three isolated individuals, but rather a man, a woman and a daughter all inescapably joined into one family (symbolized by the number 12).

Jairus came to Jesus seeking life for his daughter, but a desperate woman breaks all the ritual boundaries that come at Jesus from behind. Jairus is forced to hear the whole story regarding her uncleanness. After Jesus patiently listens to her story, he grants her the title, “daughter.” There could be no sweeter word for the woman, yet none more painful for Jairus. Is this an interruption or a divine intervention? Jairus doesn't know it at the time, but he needs this woman in his life. Though she is an unnamed, impure, and poverty stricken outsider, she is an icon of New Covenant faith. This is the kind of faith that releases the life from the age to come, the faith Jairus needs to see his daughter “rise” from the grave. Her faith and courageous initiative places her in the Hall of Fame of outstanding women in the Bible, who played pivotal roles as beacons of light and icons of faith to help shape men as future leaders in Israel. (I'm thinking of Rachel, Tamar, Zipporah, Deborah, Ruth, and Hannah, just to name a few).

Her significance is heightened by the fact that her speech is the center and turning point in the story. Refusing to cave into the fear of repercussion from the crowd, she courageously articulates every syllable of her pain, her motivation in touching Jesus, and the immediacy of her healing. She exemplifies how God transforms the shame and suffering that once isolated us into a tool to integrate us with others, creating holy communities of love and acceptance. Once we overcome our fears and come out into the open and tell the “whole truth” like this woman, our suffering becomes the doorway that integrates us into God's new humanity, where individuals are bound into families and families into nations.

The tragedy in our church today is that many of you come from cultures where vulnerability is not encouraged, and worse still, forbidden. You could be bleeding out for years and no one would know. If that's the case for you I encourage you to take a good look at the city of Boston this week. If you're bleeding out in Boston, a stranger on the street will instantly place his or her life at risk to attend to your wounds and stop the flow of blood. And if the news comes that “your daughter is dead” an entire city will come to its knees and weep with you. This was the week the city of Boston was transformed into a family.

This sermon is dedicated in loving memory to Martin Richard, Lu Lingzi, Krystle Campbell and Sean Collier, and all the courageous citizens of Boston. Amen.

1. Lisa Wangsness, “Obama pledges Boston ‘will finish the race,’” *The Boston Globe*, April 19, 2013, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2013/04/19>.

2. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 237.

3. John T. Carroll, *Luke, A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 198.

4. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 347.

5. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 351.

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