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Sermon Transcript: Foolish and Afraid

I distinctly remember the first time that I really heard that scripture passage that was read just now. It left an impression in my life that made me for a short period of time very bold. You see, around this time, I was a kid and growing up in the church and I paid attention many of the Sundays. As a little kid, I was powered by little bags of Cheerios that would keep me going through the whole thing. But what I remember is that there was this really wonderful, sweet, and amazing young person who had gone through the youth group program that my parents led over at Westminster, and her name was Amy Gregson. And she was in a terrible—I think it was a car accident, and had a spinal cord injury and lost the ability to walk. I remember as a kid just thinking like, "This isn't fair." Like any of us when a tragedy hits, you just—you try to decide whether or not it's fair. And it was just—it was really sad and I—I took it kind of hard. But I remember at some point after that accident—and I'm a little fuzzy on exactly what year this happened, but I do remember this—I remember hearing this and thinking, "So just out of faith, with a touch, someone can be healed." And we were going to, I think it was a funeral, where Amy was going to be there. And I decided that I was going to pray to God to give me the opportunity to heal Amy. I was just going to walk up to her. I had it all pictured in my mind. She'd be facing a different direction. I could just walk up and I would just touch her shoulder and ask God to use that to heal her. And I—I prayed real hard about this. And I—I had the plan. Again, it's patchy, but I have this memory of being in the backseat of a car and just praying and praying, you know. And my mom had no idea I had this plan. I had cooked this all up myself, I didn't tell anybody about it. I was praying, I was like, "God, use me. Use—use me. Do it through me, God, please." Just everything I could think of. Now you got to remember, I grew up a little Presbyterian kid, okay? So, this idea of putting your hands on somebody and healing them, that's not in my—that wasn't on the menu at Westminster Presbyterian, okay? We didn't do stuff like that. I don't know where I got this idea from except for from this scripture. So, we got to the funeral home and we're in this room, and it was exactly how I pictured it. She was in her wheelchair turned just slightly diagonal, facing away from me, and I walked into the room and I thought, "Okay, here we go." And I was praying as I was walking up to her, and just praying and praying that God would heal her. And then when I got about seven feet away from her—about the distance from here to the front pew there—I just froze. I started to feel foolish. Who did I think I was? What is this crazy idea? And then I started to feel afraid. I just remember having those two emotions of "I feel foolish" and "I feel afraid" right now. And so I didn't take another step. I just turned around and walked away.

The Anatomy of a Markan Sandwich

The people in this story today, I think, relate to the situation even more because what we have is a situation where these two individuals who go to Jesus for healing—they should be feeling foolish and they should be afraid, for good reason. And their fear and their foolishness in what they're attempting in this moment is served up to us by the gospel writer, Mark, in what some commentators call a classic Markan sandwich. A Markan sandwich is where Mark especially likes to do this: he starts one story, and then it's like it pauses, gives you something else in the middle, and then finishes it up at the end with the first story. A Markan sandwich. And the idea is that Mark has a lesson for us to hear. And by putting the one story in the middle of the other two, it's supposed to really lift up the main

point of what he's trying to say about Jesus and about us and our faith. So if we look at the sandwich being served up to us, we start with Jairus, who's a leader from the synagogue. So this leader from the synagogue going to Jesus—I don't know if you realize this, but Jesus wasn't really popular with the synagogue leadership. His teachings tended to question their authority, steer people in different understandings, he was not well-liked. And Jairus is a fool for putting his neck out to reach out to this Jesus. It could cost him his position at the synagogue. It could cost the way people look at him. And not only that, it's dangerous to be associated with this Jesus. But he's desperate for healing for his 12-year-old daughter. In the midst of this story where Jesus agrees to go to his house, we find out that over that same 12-year period of that young girl's life, there was a woman who was suffering with a bleeding that she could not stop. And for her to make her way through this crowd and get to Jesus was foolish. But it was not just foolish, it was dangerous. She should be afraid because she was violating so many laws as she did that. Because back in this time period, if you had a type of bleeding ailment like that, you were considered unclean. You were breaking the temple law by touching other people; you could make them unclean. If you had this happening to you, you should not sit on furniture that other people are going to sit on. You should not bump into anyone. You have no business being in community with anyone. That's what they had done to the holiness teachings. They had warped it into this space where then it was out of an idea that I think was probably born of—it keeps people safer when we don't have people bleeding and you could catch stuff. I mean, it was some early medical wisdom, if you will, but it turned into this type of oppressive life for her for 12 years. She can't be in community with anyone, cannot touch another human being. So when she goes into that crowd and muscles her way through, she is making every single person she bumps into ritually unclean. She's breaking the law. She's causing problems. And then for her to reach out and touch a rabbi, a teacher's cloak, she runs the risk of making that rabbi unclean. And I know this may sound crazy to us nowadays and like a bunch of old superstition stuff, but it's the way that they ordered their society. It was the law at the time. And so she was foolish and she should have been afraid. But it's her belief in what Jesus could do that's used by Jesus to heal her: "Your belief has made you well." Then we come back to the other side of our sandwich, and people come up and they go, "Jairus, just forget it. Your daughter's dead." And we all know that's it. There's nothing—there's no healing that can occur now. Just give up. But Jairus has to be foolish enough to trust that Jesus still has this. And Jesus says to him, "Don't be afraid. Just believe." And I think that at that moment, Jesus is saying, "Just believe like that woman we literally bumped into. Just believe. Have that kind of faith." And he risked his reputation to continue to walk with Jesus. He's going to look foolish. People laughed at them. And yet, there was a healing.

Inviting God Into the Mess

I think what Mark is trying to say to us in this story is that we should not let our fears or our fear of looking foolish ever get in the way of reaching out to Jesus. I know I've had this experience, and I bet some of you have had this too, where you're facing something that seems so broken, so chaotic, so messed up that you actually don't pray about it just because it would feel foolish to even ask God to do something about it. Or you're in such a situation where you're feeling such shame about what you've done, or what has been done to you, or what situation you're in, that you hesitate to even take it to God in prayer. And I think this text, if that fits you sometimes, I think this text is speaking to you and saying: don't let your fear or your worry of looking foolish ever stand in the way of reaching out to God. You don't know what God's going to do with that situation. All these years later, do I wish I had taken those extra six or seven steps and touched Amy's shoulder? I don't know. What do I think probably would have happened? I'm sorry, folks, I'm just too Presbyterian. I think I would have touched her shoulder and that would have been it. And then I would have been a little embarrassed

and then—I don't know. I don't know what I would have done with it. I have to admit that even now, I don't think looking back that it would have resulted in a healing. But just because we don't get the outcome of prayer that we're always seeking, it doesn't mean that we shouldn't invite God into the situation. Because what will God do with that prayer? What will God do with that touch? What will God do with your belief that whatever this messed-upness is going on, or this situation that feels broken, or this pain that you don't know how you can deal with—what do you know what God will do with that situation? It may not answer the prayer the way you want, but it may answer it the way you need.

From Holiness Problems to Healing Opportunities

I think another thing that Mark is trying to lift up out of this text for us is that we should be bold in our commitment to doing what is good and being involved in the healing kind of ministry that Jesus was a part of. And healing is not just physical healing. Healing is taking broken things and bringing them together and making them whole again. This woman broke the law to get to Jesus—broke the law to get there for the healing that she needed. And at no point did Jesus whip out Leviticus and remind her of all of the unholy actions she just committed on her way to him. At no point does he shame her for being so bold and courageous and moving past what is seen as proper or right or the law in order to get to the healing that she needed. All that Jesus responded with was compassion and a recognition of her great faith in that moment. And so I think maybe also what we're hearing is that maybe we shouldn't get too caught up in what is always proper or right. That sometimes customs and laws and traditions get broken for the sake of what is good and right and just. And maybe like Jesus, we should have our attention on looking for that faith and looking for the opportunity to be part of healing. That encounter would have been seen by everyone else as a holiness problem, and Jesus saw it as a healing opportunity. And so these two lessons together teach us that when it comes to our trust in God, we should be bold and courageous. We should not be afraid. And do not worry about looking foolish, because what God can do with the things that we call broken and chaotic is so much more than we could ever imagine. So let us be people who are so bold as to pray when it seems foolish, to reach out when it seems a little scary, to trust in the One that loves us. Hallelujah and amen.