

Persistence

I just got back from vacation this week. Our son, Landon, spent the semester studying in New Zealand, so I took the opportunity to take another son, Leni, on a visit there. It was truly as amazing as it is portrayed, and I had a fantastic two weeks with two of my boys, but the trip was not without its obstacles. Jet-lag made it a struggle to stay awake the first few days there, and it was a struggle to get my head back on my shoulders when we got home again. We had planned to do some hunting, but we couldn't afford a packaged hunt. We worked without the benefit of a guide. More than once a knowledge of the terrain would have been incredibly helpful! Yet the obstacles just made the trip all the more memorable. It's not like we earned the beauty of the place, but overcoming the obstacles was necessary to experience it.

Overcoming obstacles to grace is the theme in today's Gospel lesson in Mark 5:21-43. The story begins with Jairus' request to have Jesus heal his daughter, and is interrupted to tell the story of the woman with the issue of blood. After that the story of Jairus' daughter resumes. Why are these stories told like this, one nestled in the other? Because the story of the woman with the issue of blood helps us understand the story of Jairus' daughter's resurrection. These are both stories of overcoming obstacles to grace.

The woman had to fight through the crowds. The Law dictated that a woman with an issue of blood was ceremonially unclean, and anyone who touched her was also rendered unclean. Jesus taught that what defiles a person is not what touches the outside but what comes from within. This woman's faith was stronger than the impediments of the law. Access to God through faith is ALWAYS God's will.

Being a woman, touching an unrelated man was taboo. Yet she was so desperate that she risked ridicule and rejection. She knew in her heart that just the hem of his garment would be sufficient! Just a touch by God was all it would take. Her faith steeled her against the possible onslaught.

Jairus had to fight his despair. He was a synagogue ruler, who was used to having people beg favors of him, yet now his little daughter is dying, so he humbles himself to beg Jesus for the health of his daughter, recognizing Jesus as the greater one. Then the news comes that it is too late. But Jesus encourages him—have faith. He even redefines her death—she's only sleeping! Now Jairus has to decide whether to side with the professional mourners who have already begun their work, with his tradition, his family and friends, or with this Jesus who comes too late and can't see what's really going on! He believes and receives the blessing he seeks.

We, too, fight obstacles to grace. Today at the Spanish service we baptize. The family had to set a date, contact family, and prepare for the requisite meal and party afterwards. Then there is the commitment to raise the child in the faith. We find that the blessing we seek is on the other side of such obstacles as our pride, our convenience, our history, our reputation, our inertia.... When a mountain climber reaches the summit he does not deserve the summit, he has merely reached his goal. In the same way, when we battle through, we are not earning grace—grace is always free—just that sometimes it takes some doing to reach it!

Both the woman and the girl made contact with Jesus and were healed. The woman touched Jesus in faith, believing, and her faith healed her. The girl was touched by Jesus at the request of her parents, and she was restored. Sometimes the faith is granted us to receive from God the blessing we seek, sometimes others have it for us. The beauty of the ministry of the Order of St. Luke is that these prayers have faith, you don't have to—they do! We are a community, and we support one another, especially in the Spiritual dimension.

In both stories that which was dead either ritually or physically is restored. The woman with the issue of blood who had been impoverished by the doctors was healed and restored to her community. The girl who had died

was brought back, and she and her family were restored to their community. Jesus isn't just a miracle worker who wields magical healing power, these healings are signs of something--they indicate the presence of something. Where Jesus brings the power of the Kingdom to bear on our brokenness we know that the Kingdom of God has come near. That Kingdom, or the realm over which Jesus holds dominion, is nothing less than the life of heaven on earth. Ever Applegate in Eden God has been about restoring and reconciling. The end result of both of these miracles is restoration and reconciliation. However you conceive of it, the blessing you seek from God will come in the context and form of reconciliation and restoration. If at first you do not see it, perhaps you have misunderstood it, or seek it for reasons other than that for which it is given. For that is what God is doing in the world.

In both stories faith is key. The woman's faith healed her, said Jesus. Jairus' faith is instrumental in Jesus' healing of the girl. What, then, is faith? It is the substance of things hoped for, the assurance of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1) It is the confidence that what we know is trustworthy, and it is the commitment to live by what we know rather than what we see.

Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is not something we conjure up in our hearts by squinching our noses and steeling our wills against all the odds. Faith is the product of a relationship, something the Holy Spirit builds into us as we grow in grace. When a guy likes a girl his natural instinct is to approach her and try to make contact. The smart girl's instinct is to be coy, to play a little hard-to-get. It may be a bit frustrating to both of them, but the girl's intent is good. It is through overcoming obstacles that his commitment is revealed, and on the basis of that commitment a solid relationship can be built. Faith is like that. It is the obstacles to grace that draw out of us our commitment to God, and it is our commitment to God that is the context of our relationship with Him. That relationship is our faith, and in the context of that relationship that we come to know the grace of God.