

The Risk of Faith: Moving from Head to Heart
Mark 5:21-34
July 11, 2021

Ronnie Wilson feels like a failure. All joy had been absent from his emotional life for so long he had no idea what bliss was. Checking out the weather he peered out the window of his Manhattan hotel room craning his neck up the sheer grey cliff of the building facing him across 38th street and could just make out the narrow slit of sky. The realization that it was a fine morning did nothing to lift his spirits. It merely felt as if all the clouds had drained out of the blue void and settled in his heart. Sitting on the subway heading downtown Ronnie was aware that something had gone horribly wrong in his life. Many of his contemporaries from school had achieved great success: financial advisors, property developers, accountants, lawyers. What did he have? Lorraine, his neurotic wife, who spent money he didn't have on beauty treatments, designer clothes and absurdly expensive lunches with her anorexic friends who were all richer than they were. But Ronnie was too proud to admit the mess he was in. Ever the optimist he believed there was a solution just around the corner. That's what he was here for today as he headed to meet his friend in his office on the 87th floor of the South Tower in the World Trade Centre. It was 8.47 am on September 11, 2001. So opens Peter James fourth novel, **Dead Man's Footsteps**.

Lots of people today have problems with the claims of Christianity. They don't believe in the resurrection; in the virgin birth; in Jesus as the Son of God, in the bible, in heaven or hell, in the institution of church, or that God exists at all, never mind cares about us. All kinds of doubt swirl around today, both outside and inside the church. And part of this has to be laid at our feet. There is a strange notion that lies deep inside Western Christendom, namely that church is for good, moral, straight people. But how could we ever think this when Jesus was quite explicit that he came not for the well but the sick. Whether or not this is actually what we in the church think, and I suspect many do, what is indisputable is that is how we are viewed from the outside. Those disconnected from church think of us as judgmental, legalistic, self-righteous and often hypocritical. And perhaps worst of all, irrelevant. How can we change this picture?

In previous generations we placed a great deal of emphasis on members believing certain things about the faith, about the bible. When young folks were confirmed, they had to memorize the key elements of the faith and facts about the bible and recite them back in order to qualify as members of the church.

When my son and daughter were young I took them through the catechism. They were to answer questions like this: **What is the chief end of man?** The response went: **the chief end of man is to love God and enjoy him forever.** I don't know if my kids benefited from this process since today they have an arm's length relationship with the church, but the important point to note is that the entire process was aimed at head knowledge. What we had to believe were biblical facts and what Reformed Christians believed. Some, of course, took this seriously; others didn't!

In her book, **Christianity after Religion**, Diana Butler Bass describes her experience at a graduation service when she was a young Christian. The preacher spoke on Philippians two where Christ emptied himself and took on the form of a servant. The preacher likened Jesus to an imperial warlord who triumphed over all his enemies. His emphasis left Diana shaking and she found herself slipping out of the hall. She said to another who had left: *how could he do that? He turned Jesus into Caesar, a hierarchical monster.* She goes on to tell us that this sermon marked the moment when she fell into the **belief gap**. This gap has widened in North America and is everywhere today: in society and in church.

Fact is a huge shift has occurred in Western Christianity. During the second half of the 20th century, the emphasis shifted from beliefs to practice. Or if you like, we moved from intellectual assent to doctrines to the experience of faith. The woman who came to Jesus that day had very few doctrines in her head that she would have believed. What she had was a pressing need to touch the one who was reputed to be a healer and teacher. Her heart reached out to Jesus in faith. Is it possible that people today who suffer from all sorts of physical, emotional, and spiritual maladies, is it possible that the church could be open to people like her who are seeking healing, and not a list of beliefs? I know it's not fashionable to say so, but I believe that people really do long for a spiritual connection to God. Many

today, I am convinced, are like this woman in the Gospel: they are looking for community, compassion, and hope.

When people say they are not religious but are spiritual perhaps we ought to be open for a conversation. What they are saying is that they no longer think the church is a place where their spiritual needs can be addressed. But my sense is that people want **to experience** God! They don't just want to believe things **about** God! It's the **what** questions which are causing people to fall into the belief gap. An experience of faith in Jesus moves us to engage, to learn, and to reflect deeply. When we ask how faith is relevant to life, we move to questions of meaning and purpose that push us to engage the faith rather than just memorize facts about the faith.

My hope is that we would all be both religious and spiritual. By this I mean that we in the church would engage the **how** questions within the orthodox faith. We ask, not **what we believe**, but **how** is our faith relevant to our lives. This is what we would call an experiential knowledge or a movement from head to heart.

The word for believe in Latin is **credo**. It means **I set my heart upon or I give my loyalty to** when we speak of religious believing. Prior to the last couple of centuries, the word **believe** had little to do with intellectual choice. It was more like a marriage vow, **I do!** A medieval Christian wouldn't just speak of believing facts about God, but rather that the spiritual connection they had with God flowed through the sacraments and symbols celebrated in church. It wasn't intellectual assent to doctrinal purity, but the mystery and wonder of God in Christ who died for them.

Mark tells the story a woman who has spent all her money on doctors for twelve years. None were able to help her condition; in fact, she has got worse. In her desperation she reaches out to Jesus. We know very little more about her. What we do know is that she believes that if she can just touch this healer, she will be healed.

She had plenty of reasons to be terrified. She wasn't supposed to be there, but she was desperate, desperate for healing. No, she wasn't supposed to be there, sneaking through the crowd, trying to touch just the hem of his coat. Jewish purity laws said she wasn't supposed

to be there. She's been bleeding for twelve years and ritually unclean and hiding away from life.

How many of us are like her? Sneaking around with our heads down afraid to be recognized, desperately hiding the truth about ourselves for fear of being shunned, embarrassed, and isolated. Inside we're desperate to find wholeness, but afraid to take the risk of exposing ourselves to another.

She pushed her way through the crowd to Jesus who looks like he is in a hurry. This doesn't look like the best time, but it might be her only time. He's on his way to heal a dying girl, but what if I just touch him, even the edge of his robe. And so, she did it!

And she immediately felt the bleeding stop. She was healed. No more hiding in the shadows, avoiding everyone. She had what she'd come for and she was off. No harm done. No one had recognized her. She'd just melt back into the crowd and slip off home. But Jesus stopped. "Who touched my clothes?" Jairus is pulling on his arm, "Who cares who touched you, come and save my daughter." The disciples looked at him in amazement. With this crowd jostling and pushing and you're asking "who touched me". But Jesus asked again, "who touched me?"

She froze in fear; she'd been found out. Now the game was up. She had plenty of reasons to be terrified. She wasn't supposed to be there. But now she had to come forward. This was risky! But she had no option. She fell to her knees at Jesus' feet, shaking like a leaf and told him the whole story. And somehow, he knew. He reached out his hand: **Daughter, you took a risk of faith and now you're healed and whole. Live well, live blessed and be saved.** Jesus offers her shalom!

How often are we just like her? How often do we think that we're not worth any more than that? Surely God has got more important things to do? More important people to attend to?

Christ won't force you. He stands at the door and knocks. We have to open it. We have to invite him in. We have to take the risk of faith.

I know, it's much easier to just live with the pain, to hide, to slip into the crowd. We've been doing that for years. To step out, to risk faith, will take us out of our comfort zone, expose our weakness, our fear and our brokenness. To reach out and touch Jesus will take us on a journey outside ourselves; it may mean change, transformation, facing our doubts and fears. Who needs that? The bleeding may be easier to live with. This is how we rationalize it, but down deep we know it's not easier to live with.

For Ronnie Wilson there would be no solution. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time. But this woman took the step of faith, yes, in desperation, as did the synagogue ruler, because they trusted the one who claimed to come from God. He offers them and us wholeness, healing, forgiveness and shalom. I ask you to reach out to him this morning. Take the risk of faith.

Amen