

## **“Defeating Defeat”**

Years ago the pulpit master Harry Emerson Fosdick preached a sermon called, *The Importance of Doubting Your Doubts*. “The antidote to doubt,” he said, “is not faith.” Doubting doubts is the step before the leap to faith.

The same approach applies to the defeats we are dealt. Disappointment and defeat in life is inevitable. For Christians, however, “giving in” and “buckling under” the burden isn’t an option. Penetrating the barrier that stands between us and a full, abundant life, requires the defeat of defeat itself.

In the third volume of his three-part memoir, *Telling Secrets*, Frederick Buechner describes the anguish he and his wife experienced over their daughter. He writes: "What happened was that (she) stopped eating. There was nothing scary about it at first. . . Just the sort of thing any girl who thought she'd be prettier if she lost a few pounds might do . . . But then as months went by it did become scary. Anorexia nervosa is the name of the sickness she was suffering from." He was helpless. Nothing he did worked. He argued, pleaded, warned and bribed her, but none of his attempts made her start eating.

A psychiatrist told him he could do nothing to cure her, and that the best thing he could do, which didn’t seem like a best thing at all, was to stop trying to do anything. He writes, "The only way I knew to be a father was to take care of her – to move heaven and earth to make her well, and of course, I couldn't do that. I didn't have either the wisdom or the power to make her well." (*Telling Secrets, A Memoir*, p. 23-26)

The parents of sick or injured children know *exactly* what he means. You would do anything at all if you thought it could restore your child. I think about Angi waiting all of those days for lab reports, hoping something could be done for Alyssa, but not knowing, and realizing it was beyond her control and totally in God's hands.

I still see the agony on my parent's faces as my sister, Ann, lay in a coma from which she would not wake. Every instinct in them cried, "Do something!" But what could they do but cling to faith and hold the fragile hope that somehow, Ann would open her eyes, sit up in bed and say, "I'm going to be all right."

It is not hard to put yourself in the place of the heart-sick father who pleaded with Jesus to heal his daughter.

But first, let's recall last Sunday's lesson. Jesus and the disciples sailed west across the Sea of Galilee to minister in Gentile territory. While Jesus slept, a storm struck, threatening to wash their little boat away. The disciples feared for their lives, but Jesus revealed his powers by calming the storm and getting them safely to shore.

Things did not go well on the other side. Jesus healed a deranged man, which frightened people so much they told him to leave. Now we find Jesus sailing back east across the sea that was a liquid boundary between Jews and Gentiles. Mark used the storm a symbol of the resistance to bridging the boundary, that Jesus was determined to cross.

Jesus no sooner got out of the boat than Jairus fell at his feet. He was a well-known and respected leader of the synagogue. He begged Jesus to come to his house where his twelve year-old daughter was dying. *"I know that if you lay hands on her she will be healed,"* he cried.

Jesus went with Jairus, but no sooner had they begun than a woman desperate for healing was at Jesus' feet. Mark used a popular literary device by combining two stories, or wrapping one story around another. Mark used this technique to say

something important about Jesus. Note the parallels. First, is the number 12. Israel had 12 tribes. Jesus called 12 disciples. Jairus' daughter was 12 years old, and the woman had been hemorrhaging for 12 years -- the girl's entire life! Maybe Mark used these healing stories as the sign that Jesus had come to bring a new Israel into being.

Both stories are about women in crisis. We don't know their names, but we know their needs. Both of them have become outsiders. They are both unclean because of their conditions, and the cleanliness laws prohibited anyone from touching them lest they become unclean.

As Jesus and Jairus work their way through the crowd the woman approaches Jesus from behind. She is dressed so no one will recognize her because she is forbidden to be near others. She was supposed to remain isolated from everyone. Her story could be taken from today's headlines. She went from one specialist to another with no results. Her health insurance provider dropped her. She spent what little she had left on quack cures.

Desperate people will go to extremes. If you've ever been sick for a long time, you'll know what I mean. There comes a point after all the tests and procedures and treatments and clinical trials that you'll do anything to get better. You fly to the Philippines where you've heard there is a retired pharmacist who created a chemical cocktail that has cured people in your condition. During your two-month stay you are on a "fruit only" diet, you drink gallons of herbal extracts, and meditate and chant with a guru an hour a day to purge every vestige of negativity from your spirit-mind.

Some translations say the woman suffered from a "flow" of blood. Flow can also mean "a river." A twelve-year river of life flowed out of her. She was anemic, exhausted and isolated from everyone. Only one possibility left. She believed that if she could just put a fingertip on the hem of his cloak, it would heal her. And it did. Jesus turned to find her she fell at his feet, trembling with fear. His first word was, "Daughter." Jesus restored her as

a “daughter of Abraham,” and an heir of God’s promise. “Don’t be afraid. Your faith has made you well.”

Desperate people take drastic measures. Jairus’ didn’t care what his synagogue buddies thought. He wasn’t afraid of the public opinion that would buzz after seeing him beg at the feet of that *Jesus* character. His daughter was dying. Fathers weren’t supposed to get worked up over daughters. Women and children were at the bottom wrung of society. You would do it for a son, but Jairus’ desperation and love for his girl trumped the rules and opinions.

While Jesus spoke with the woman, word came from Jairus’ house to not bother with the preacher. “Your daughter is dead.” Maybe Jairus thought he should have spent the final hours with his daughter instead of fetching Jesus. Despair was about to take over, but Jesus assured Jairus with a short sermon he preached often -- “Do not fear.” When they arrived at the house the professional mourners were already at work. Jesus told them to pipe down and said he hadn’t come all this way for a funeral. Jesus took Jairus and his wife into the room where the girl layed. He took her hand and said, “Get up!” Two words, and she did. *“Give the child something to eat, she’s starving.”*

Frederick Buechner says we should all see ourselves in the place of that little girl, imagine him taking our hand and telling us to get up and live. He writes: *“You who believe, and you who sometimes believe, and sometimes don’t believe much of anything, and you who would give almost anything to believe if only you could.... ‘Get up!’ he says, all of you -- all of you.”*

Jesus was determined to bring life to every crevice and cranny where death had a grip. In Jesus’ presence, people who were dead didn’t stay that way. Easter walked hand in hand with Jesus wherever he went. Mark’s *“story within a story”* has many layers of meaning, but there is one layer that is especially important as we prepare for a transition of leadership. It is that choice between faith and fear, or, to put it bluntly, between life and death.

**There's something about us that finds it easier to get accustomed to death than embrace the unexpected things that life brings. Take the crowd outside Jairus' house -- what they thought would happen happened. No point bothering with Mr. Jesus. Just sign the death certificate and let's start weeping and wailing. When Jesus said, "Enough already! The girl isn't dead. She's sleeping," the crowd in the house of death, laughed at him.**

**We talk adnauseum about the wonder of God's unconditional love, and then let ourselves to be jerked around by fears and talk of limitation and shortages and resign ourselves to defeat. "It's too bad about Bill drinking. They've tried everything. They say there's no such thing as recovery. Just look at what Michael Jackson did to himself." "You can't ask people to do more than they are already." The future is fixed.**

**In his book, *The Life of the Beloved*, Henri Nouwen describes our condition:**

**Look at the many 'if' questions we raise: What am I going to do if I do not find a spouse, a house, a job, a friend, a benefactor? What am I going to do if they fire me, if I get sick, if an accident happens, if I lose my friends, if my marriage does not work out, if a war breaks out?**

**What if tomorrow the weather is bad, the buses are on strike, or an earthquake happens? What if someone steals my money, breaks into my house, rapes my daughter, or kills me?**

**The stiller of the storm and the healer of Abraham's daughters can't stand being around the contagion of fear and death. Over the years I have observed the truth of the saying, "Misery loves company." Get negative people together and they go on about what's wrong and whose fault it is, and the more they gripe the better they feel. Get low achievers together and they talk about who lost their job and who failed at this or that, and they get consolation from it. Get members of "*we're-in-decline*" churches together and the conversation turns to the hard times other**

**churches are going through. They feel better knowing there are other churches just as unsuccessful as they are.**

**Someone asked a church growth consultant what can be done to renew the mainline church. Here was his answer: “Tell stories. Tell good stories of churches that were born again, raised from the dead. The declining church can’t stand stories of success and resurrection. The declining church loves stories of death and defeat because it helps it feel better about itself. Nothing defeats defeat better than a good story of resurrection.”**

**I remember the conversation I had with a member of the church at the beginning of our first capital campaign. The person’s comments were peppered with the words, “can’t, won’t, shouldn’t,” and then this declaration -- “We’ll be lucky to get \$45,000 in pledges.” As it turned out, we were a little luckier. Pledges totaled \$436,000!”**

**Your faith wasn’t jerked around by predictions of defeat. It’s an example of what happens when we remember the resurrection. I remind you of this because despite what you may feel, despite what your calculators and forecasts say, despite your anxiousness, despite the changes that will happen around here, the church will be fine. A year from now the gas and electricity won’t be shut off. The windows won’t be boarded up. There won’t be chains on the doors. The property won’t be overgrown with weeds.**

**Don’t be afraid. Only believe. Get up. Go in peace.**

#### **EVICTION NOTICE**

**You are hereby banished from the House of Fear forever.  
With malice aforethought, you have  
flagrantly withheld the monthly rent  
of guilt, anxiety, fear, shame and self-condemnation.  
You have adamantly refused to worry about your salvation.**

**Already I overheard one dismal tenant say,  
*“There goes the neighborhood!”***

**Your freedom from fear is not only dangerous but  
contagious.**

**Real estate values have plummeted;  
Gullible investors are hard to find.**

**WHY?**

**Your callous and carefree rejection of slavery!  
A pox on you and all deluded lovers of liberty!  
Signed, The Prince of Death**