

## CLASS BEFORE RECESS

Matthew 9:18-26

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on June 8, 2008, Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### Focus Text

*While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, 'My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.' And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.' Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, 'Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.' And instantly the woman was made well. When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute-players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, 'Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.' And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district.*

As I said in the children's sermon, before we go out for recess, we have to have class. So get out your books.

Yes, I mean those blue Bibles in the pew racks in front of you, or under your pew if you are on the front row.

- Turn to our text for today: Matthew 9. It is on pages 8 and 9 of the New Testament of your Bibles. The New Testament is the second half of the Bible.
- On page 9, find verse 18, near the top of the first column.
- Listen while I read it:

*While he (Jesus) was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live."*

Don't close your Bibles yet, but let's stop here because this is really the only verse we'll talk about before recess.

Some background:

- The first gospel written was the Gospel of Mark.
- It was written about thirty years after Jesus died.
- When Matthew and Luke sat down to write their Gospels, they used a lot of Mark's gospel.

The story that this verse introduces in Matthew is found in almost identical form in Mark.<sup>1</sup> In fact you may be more familiar with it in Mark, because in Mark the father who comes to Jesus because his daughter is dying is named Jairus, and Jairus is identified as "a ruler of the synagogue."

But look again at the Bible in your laps. Look at Matthew 9, verse 18 again.

- In the middle of the verse look at the words "of the synagogue."
- If you squint real hard, you see a very light superscription of the letter *c* in italics.
- Now run your finger down the right hand column of the page to where there are several footnotes.
- Notice the first one begins with the letter *c*, again in italics.
- Then notice that the footnote says: "Gk lacks *of the synagogue*."

What do you think "Gk" stands for?

- It means "Greek" the language in which the New Testament was written.
- What this footnote says is: "In the original Greek manuscript in which Matthew wrote this Gospel, the words 'of the synagogue' do not appear. The verse reads 'a leader came to Jesus,' not 'a leader of the synagogue came to Jesus.'"

Hmmm.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 5:21-43.

If these words weren't original with Matthew, then who added them?

The people who translated Matthew's gospel added them.

Why would the translators add these words?

- These translators could tell in this part of Jesus' life, Matthew was following Mark; therefore, they may have assumed that Matthew inadvertently left out the words "of the synagogue."
- But it is also possible that Matthew *intended* to depict the man coming to Jesus not as leader of the synagogue, but as leader of the community, a leader of the Romans, a military leader, a leader of the enemy and the oppressor.

Either scenario conveys an important message to us:

- 1) If the man coming to Jesus is indeed a "leader of the synagogue," then Jesus is healing someone *within* Judaism. This is consistent with his purpose, also stated in Matthew, that he has come "for the lost sheep of the house of Israel."<sup>2</sup> This message might imply that the healing action of God is focused primarily on, and perhaps limited to, those who are already a part of God's people.
- 2) If, on the other hand, the man is a leader not of the synagogue but of the community, then Jesus' healing of the man's daughter depicts a movement in Jesus' life *from* Israel *outward* to other people and nations. This movement culminates in the final verses of Matthew, the Great Commission, where after his death and resurrection, Jesus commissions his disciples to "go therefore make disciples of *all nations*."<sup>3</sup>

Each possibility is consistent with a different aspect of Matthew's theology and Jesus' life:

- Jesus' ministry *to* and *within* the people of God
- As well as the movement of his ministry *from* the people of God *to* all people.

Both including the words and leaving the words out teach us an important aspect of Christian faith.

- Ministry *within* the community of faith is important.
- Ministry *from* the community of the faith *outward* to the world is important.
- Ministry within the community is never a stopping point.
- Ministry to people outside the community of faith runs dry without ministry within.

Being a Christian, being a church, involves both. In this regard, the Christian faith is not a matter of "either/or" but "both/and," whether we write "of the synagogue" into the text or leave it out!

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Moving from the specifics of this particular text, the fact that there are questions about the actual words that appear in the Bible may lead to other questions for which our faith needs answers.

For example, assuming Matthew intentionally changed Mark by omitting the words "of the synagogue," was that legitimate during Matthew's day? Or was he taking words out of context, twisting facts to fit his 30-second sound bite?

Changing Mark was legitimate.

Each of the Gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – had a bank of data about Jesus – stories, legends, parables, eyewitness accounts – that had been circulating and developing over thirty or more years.

- Each writer took the information at hand and melded that information into a literary piece known as a Gospel, which means, literally, "good news."
- Each had his own emphases in presenting "the good news of Jesus Christ."
- Each painted a picture of Christ with different colors, different brush strokes, different shades of light and dark.
- Each emphasized different aspects of who Jesus Christ was.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 15:24.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 28:16-20.

Therefore it is entirely appropriate for Matthew to omit Mark's words "of the synagogue" so as to emphasize that in attracting this Roman civic leader, Jesus was spreading his message to the whole world, not just to the Jewish people into which he was born. Among other things, it reminds us that our role as Christians is not just service *in* and *among* people who are already Christian, but indeed our role is to "make disciples of all nations."

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Is acknowledgement of such varieties of meaning within the Bible legitimate in our day?

Of course it is.

- We do not have Jesus in the flesh.
- He is not here to tell us exactly what happened when, what he said to whom when, what he meant by what he said.
- Rather, we have four literary witnesses to his life and ministry:
  - The Gospel of Matthew
  - The Gospel of Mark
  - The Gospel of Luke
  - And the Gospel of John.

The way he comes to life for us, the way we come to know him, is as he leaps off the pages of these gospels and becomes a living, breathing presence to us. We are a people of the book, and he lives for us through the text as it is presented to us:

- In our own reading
- In our hearing it read
- In our studying it
- In our hearing it taught
- In our hearing it preached
- In our singing it and hearing it sung
- In our sharing with others what we think it means and in our hearing from others what they think it means.

Christ lives to us through the words of Matthew, the words of Mark, the words of Luke, and the words of John – as those words are lifted from the page and become part of our consciousness.

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Might it hinder our faith that we do not have one, complete, factual, historically verified, scientifically proven account of Jesus' life?

It might, but it doesn't have to.

To need such degree of proof and verification probably says more about our need for proof than it does about Christ's willingness to meet that need.

- Faith in Christ
- Belief in Christ
- Commitment to Christ
- Discipleship in following Christ

are more personal and deep than iron-clad verification of his life and words. Needing verification from Christ is like needing verification from anyone who loves us. It is best when it comes through the relationship, not from something external that claims to prove it.

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Can the fact that what we have are literary witnesses to Christ actually enhance our faith?

I believe it can; and I know it does for me.

- When I read or study or preach from a gospel, I remind myself that I am stepping into a community of people who have been reading, studying, and interpreting what has been passed down about Jesus Christ from these four writers.
- I join in a conversation that precedes me by 2000 years and will go on until Christ brings “a new heaven and a new earth” and “wipes all tears from [our] eyes.”<sup>4</sup>
- When I read Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, I know that I join a literary conversation with them about One who is larger than us all.

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My friends, I do not have proof that God exists. I have never seen God with my own eyes, heard God’s voice, moved my fingertips across the palm of God’s hand.

Yet there is one thing that I know I have. I have black print on white page, the black print on white page of the scripture.

- I can see print.
- I can touch print.
- I can circle and underline print, smudge its ink on my fingers and clothes.

I most often find God when I open the book. It is as if the print begins to move on the page, to pulsate, to lift itself up and stand in front of me, a living being, like Ezekiel’s dry bones.<sup>5</sup> As black print is lifted off white page, it becomes filled with color, light shines through it and from it. It whispers in my ear and asks me to dance. When I accept, I find myself dancing with the Holy God.

That black print is put on white page by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It often is difficult and confusing, contradictory and even boring. Yet every time it leaps off the page and invites me to dance, it touches a different part of my life.

After a while, invariably, it settles back down on the page, and I return to whatever I was doing before I turned to it. But I am never the same person I was, for every time I dance with scripture, it changes me.

Whether Matthew did or did not write “in the synagogue” to describe the man who came to Jesus, my prayer is that you, too, will experience the Spirit of God in the interaction you have with black print on white page. Every time I teach you, every time I preach in your midst, I am hopeful that that dance begins, and that you are part of it. That is why I preach and teach every opportunity you give me.

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Let’s have our meal together and then go outside for recess.

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<sup>4</sup> Revelation 21:1-4.

<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel 37:1-14.