

When God Fails to Meet our Expectations  
by Anne Sims

(On the story of the healing of Jairus' daughter from Mark 5)

What a story Mark brings us today: the faith of a loving father, the healing power of the son of God, and the miraculous restoration of a little girl. It would make a great hallmark movie, wouldn't it? Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, one of the religious aristocracy, is forced to leave the synagogue and seek out an itinerant teacher named Jesus when his little girl falls desperately ill. On the way to Jairus' house, Jesus stops along the way to investigate the healing of a sick woman, until some mourners from Jairus' house arrive to say, "don't bother; she's already dead." Jesus reassures the grieving father, "do not fear, only believe," and when they arrive at Jairus' home, Jesus calls the little girl to wake up, and she did. And Jesus told them all to keep it a secret.

We don't know how long this story was kept a secret. Who could stop themselves from sharing news like this? And certainly we know that the gospel of Mark was written relatively soon after Jesus' death. Matthew and Luke tell this story, too, which helps give it power...but it also creates an unrealistic expectation of who Jesus is and how God interacts with us. And sometimes, one might even say more often than not, God fails to meet those expectations.

It's a shocking thing to say, I know. But I think the problem is less with God, and more with us. Maybe another story will help flesh this out. But first, a disclaimer: this is someone else's story, and I'm telling it to you as I've come to understand it over the years. I'm sure there are factual errors, and that some of the details will be wrong. Bear with me: it may not be entirely accurate, but it is a true story of a child and a family struggling with what happens when God does not meet our expectations.

Nearly 42 years ago in Alabama, a woman named Mary gave birth to her fourth child, who would be her third son. This had been a risky pregnancy for her; she was almost forty herself, and five years before, her only daughter was still-born. Mary and her husband had learned about the cause, Rh incompatibility or Rh disease: her blood was not compatible with that of her daughter, and potentially any future children. The hospital said it was prepared to treat her son, and so when he was born, they gave him a transfusion to counteract the effect of the disease. All should have been well, but her little boy's body rejected some of the new blood, and they told Mary and her husband that their baby would probably not live. They named his condition cerebral palsy.

Mary prayed, and asked her friends and her church to pray, and they asked others to pray, and their little boy survived. The doctors told her that her child would likely be severely physically and mentally handicapped, and tried to prepare her for what this might mean. And Mary and her friends and her church continued to pray, and the little boy continued to live. He grew, but he did not progress like other babies. He crawled, but did not walk, and cried in pain when they held him up by the hands to help him walk between them. He began to talk, and they saw no signs of the mental deficits the doctors anticipated, and so then the doctors told Mary and her husband their little boy would never walk.

When he was three, Mary's child had the first of several surgeries on his legs. This was the first, but would be far from the last. In this first surgery, his Achilles' tendon was lengthened to allow him to put his heel down when he stood. In the second, muscle was taken from one part of his leg and wrapped around his left foot, which was turned inward towards his body. They fitted him with braces to try to help his bones grow normally and to strengthen his legs to help him walk, but it wasn't enough, and as he grew he continued to wear heavy braces on his left leg to help him walk. And Mary and her friends and her church kept praying, and thanked God for how far her little son had come.

When the little boy was in elementary school, his mother started going to a new church, one which believed in faith healings. They taught Mary that if she asked with a pure heart, and believed enough, and was free of sin, then when she asked in faith, Jesus would heal her son: would even lengthen his left leg, now shorter than the other, and make it perfect and normal. And this new church began to pray with her, and to hold healing services, and to lay hands on the little boy and pray for his healing. For years they prayed, as the little boy played Little League baseball and won the Sportsmanship award, as he began to develop into a great student and a good friend. And he learned to sing, and traveled with the Montgomery Boy's Choir.

But his leg didn't get better. He worked hard, and his parents worked with him, to develop some flexibility and stability in that leg. He gradually grew out of needing a brace...but his leg was never what you'd call normal. He ran an 8 minute mile in high school after years of working at it, and he went off to college and worked multiple jobs to make ends meet. But his leg never got better...it began to get worse.

If you haven't figured it out yet, I'm talking about my husband, Ben.

He eventually left his mother's church, not because of all the healing lines and all the unrealized hopes, but because when he moved to a new town, the Methodists were friendliest. He eventually went to seminary at Duke, where we met, and so the story goes. By the time we came to Ann Street to visit for the first time, Ben was temporarily in a wheelchair, recovering from surgery on his left leg, trying to compensate for some of the damage done over the years by his cerebral palsy. That's how the SPRC first saw him. And we still pray for healing, although not so much for the complete healing and restoration of his body, because by now we know that the damage done by the cerebral palsy affects more than just his leg, but for the strength to do the work he's called to, and for the doctors and therapies and medicines to be available when he needs them.

But it's rare that we talk to Mary that we aren't reminded in some way that God didn't meet her expectations when Ben didn't get a complete, spectacular, undeniably divine healing of that leg. But Jairus got his daughter back...what does that mean for people like Ben? Or like me? I had my own birth defect, leaving me with lots of arthritis. I'm so near-sighted that I started wearing contact lenses not to avoid my glasses, but in hopes that having that little piece of plastic on my eyeball would slow down the changes to the shape and function of my eyes. I've prayed for complete healing before, and I believed that God could do it, and Ben and I have both witnessed people's health being restored in ways that were nothing short of miraculous.

I'm inclined to think now that Jairus' story is more valuable to us as a parable than it is as a historical account, that there is more depth to it than simply using faith as a kind of magic wand, that there is more to healing than fixing physical ailments, that miracles are more common—and more commonplace—than we think, and that there is more to grace than we can imagine.

When we look closely at the language used to for words like healing, wholeness, and salvation, we find that they are all connected together. The word salvation shares a root with “salve” or healing ointment, and to save is to heal. There is a connection with forgiveness as well; we remember some of the other healing stories of Jesus, where forgiveness of sins is connected to healing and to restoration of community: the stories of the healing of the man who was blind from birth, the crippled man by the pool of Siloam, and of the ten lepers.

To heal, then, is to make whole, and adds some real richness to this story of Jairus' daughter, who is healed—resurrected—restored to Jairus by Jesus. Jesus was his last hope: Jairus was a leader of the synagogue, and thus had some authority and some pull in the community. He had access to doctors and priests and all the help available to someone in that time and place. But all his efforts to save his daughter were in vain. His status let him down. His connections let him down. His money, even, let him down, when he had done all that could be done, and still his daughter lay at the point of death. His last hope was to find that itinerant teacher, Jesus, that he had heard so much about, and see if there really was any truth to the rumors about what he could do. When his daughter was restored to him, he was restored to his places in the community.

We get an even more powerful image of healing as restoration in the story-within-a-story from this passage. The verses I didn't read tell the story of a woman who had been bleeding—hemorrhaging—for twelve years. All this time she had been ill, and there had been no one that could cure her. Even worse, the blood made her ritually unclean, and so much of the time, she could not be around others in the community. Her family probably made the decision to risk her company from time to time, but no one else would. She wouldn't be welcome in the temple or in the marketplace, or in others' homes, because they would have to then purify themselves to remove the taint from associating with her.

When she touched Jesus' clothes, immediately her bleeding stopped and Jesus looked for her and spoke to her, reassuring her that her faith had made her well. Wellness was not only that her physical condition was cured, but also that she was restored to the comforts of family and home, to work and to worship, to go to the marketplace and to enjoy her friends again. And in the phrase, “your faith has made you well,” we should hear echoes: “ your sins are forgiven”...“your faith has made you whole”... “your faith has saved you”.

Restoration and healing, forgiveness and salvation and wholeness, then, mean more than a physical condition. For Jesus, to be healed or restored or forgiven or saved or made whole means that you have entered fellowship with a community that loves you and supports you. This is what is so important about moments like the one we share today with Evan Williams and his family, for baptism is more than a rite of passage; it is a sign of the healing and wholeness and salvation that comes from Christ. Evan is a part of us now. He is our brother, and we are his sisters and brothers. He has our love and our support, whatever he may go through.

For many, this love and support is ultimately more important than physical healing. Here is the faith community where we pray that our friends and loved ones will be blessed with healing, and where we acknowledge that sometimes that healing comes from the efforts of doctors and surgeries and therapies and medication—and I'm convinced we should acknowledge that as miraculous! And we must acknowledge as well that sometimes we don't see the healing we expect. Sometimes God does not meet our expectations, just as he did not meet Mary's expectations for Ben. She wanted a son, who, like his brothers, was athletic, a football player, a young man who might enroll at West Point or enlist in the Army like his father. She expected God to restore Ben's body so that he could do these things. Instead, God gave him something more—and Ben counts each day as a gift from God.

There is a difference between what we expect of God and what God expects of us. We sometimes expect magic: dramatic healing, direct interventions in our lives. We share email stories about little children found yards away from a devastating car crash who say Jesus helped them out of the car. We say it's miraculous when a hurricane passes us by, forgetting that it isn't a miracle for those who aren't so fortunate. And we sometimes feel that by the sheer force of our own will we can make God do what we want: free a loved one from addiction, make us wealthy, order the world after our own intentions. After all, doesn't the Bible say that if we are persistent in prayer, that God will give us whatever we ask?

But there's a loophole there, that we will align our prayers with God's expectations: that we will hold fast to our faith, that we will persist in prayer, that we will try to line up what we want with what God wants, that we will trust that God is with us. Part of that expectation is that we live the best we can with what we've got, and to share and show our faith as we do it. And that's where Mary's expectations kind of fall down. She's looked for Ben's whole life for the miracle, the one that would show God's power, and never seen the everyday miracles that make his life special: he was never expected to live, and yet here he is. He was expected to be profoundly mentally and physically impaired, and yet he's earned two Master's degrees. He was never expected to walk, but he cut the grass at our house this weekend.

And in turn, Ben's done his best to meet God's expectations. The grace of God and some really great doctors (also sent by God, we're convinced) has given him the ability to live and love and work. While he never played high school football or made it into the Army, he has become a pastor, and a good one, if I say so myself. And I do. And Ben's done his part to learn from his life: he's learned how to care for himself and others, and he's particularly good at talking to people who are hurting and whose lives are falling apart. He's able to tell them what he's learned from his life: God's grace enables us day by day to be the people we are called to be; we learn from our struggles how to relate to others, and that Ben is who he is now because of what he's been through.

We've learned over the years we've been married that it doesn't pay to dictate to God how things must be. Instead, we've learned to pray sometimes to change who we are, not to change who God is—to help us meet God's expectations, rather than try to force God to meet ours. That's the lesson I want us to learn today from the healing of Jairus' daughter. Jairus did not go to Jesus to order God to heal his daughter.

He'd prayed in the synagogue, he'd sent for the physicians and healers, he'd done everything there was to do. Jairus went to Jesus because he was at the end of his rope, and thought that Jesus was his only hope for a miracle, his only chance to save his little girl.

Jesus' response was simple: "Do not fear, only believe."

We could translate that as "do not fear, only trust," and that is the crux of the matter. That is God's expectation of us: do not fear, only trust. And God is always worthy of our trust. Whether Jairus' daughter had been restored to life or to eternal life, Jairus was asked to trust. When our lives seem to find us far from health and happiness, we are asked to trust. And we know that when we trust God, we will find forgiveness, and restoration, and healing, and wholeness, and salvation. Thanks be to God.