

OPENING HYMN

“Build a Longer Table” (*All Creation Sings 1062*) or find a YouTube version, such as this one: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrstV-4iGw8>

OPENING PRAYER

Almighty God, you have given us this good land as our heritage. Make us always remember your generosity and constantly do your will. Bless our land with honesty in the workplace, truth in education, and honor in daily life. Save us from violence, discord, and confusion; from pride and arrogance; and from every evil course of action. When times are prosperous, let our hearts be thankful; and, in troubled times, do not let our trust in you fail. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*ELW*, p. 77)

FOCUS VERSES

Mark 5:21-43

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Hymnals (*ELW*)
- Bibles (NRSV)
- scrap paper and pens or pencils

Faithfulness

Session four

Faith risks: Jairus and the Faithful Woman

BY DENISE RECTOR

INTRODUCTION

When I was growing up, people often said: “Don’t talk about politics or religion.” That’s because—as you know—people hold passionate, intense beliefs about both subjects. Politics and religion are also connected to traditions passed down to us from people we love and trust, and people who cared deeply for us. Disagreements in the realm of politics or religion can be powerful and at times, may even seem extreme. How can we talk about challenging topics in sensitive and faithful ways, especially in today’s climate? How can we foster deep conversation and connection?

One of the first and best things we can do is not talk, but listen. Too often, I catch myself not listening as closely to the person who is speaking, but rather, planning my next statement. So how can we listen more compassionately? Maybe one way is to listen with “Psalm 139 ears.” We can remember that, as the psalm says, each of us is “fearfully and wonderfully made” by God. We can consider not only our own dignity (a dignity that allows us to be compassionate, instead of uncaring or harsh), but also a God-given dignity that extends to the speaker. Perhaps a kinder, more thoughtful world really can start with us listening in our congregations and communities.

Listening well requires slowing down. Slowing down may feel like swimming upstream or going against the grain in our culture of viral *this* and sensational *that*, of sound bites and zingers, retorts and

clap-backs. Still, Christ has equipped us to begin practicing a more thoughtful way of being, listening and conversing. Our life in Christ, our faith-walk, is lived in the real world—a fast-paced place where we sometimes need to slow down.

This brings us to our fourth and final study session based on Mark 5:21-43, which offers a story-within-a-story. The story of the Faithful Woman (who has been living with an issue of blood) appears right in the middle of the story about Jairus' daughter. When we read these stories closely, we see Jesus responding compassionately and performing miracles in the lives of two people who are, in a sense, swimming upstream and going against cultural norms. In this session, we'll explore how they live their faith in their world.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Let's practice listening (and going against the grain) with a low-key example. As a Black woman with family roots in the southern U.S., I grew up eating types of protein that were cast away by others. This included salt pork and tongue (*lengua*, although I did not know it by that name then). I also learned to love the texture of okra in all kinds of dishes. Yet, based on a recent survey by Instacart and Harris Poll of "divisive" foods (see <https://www.allrecipes.com/americas-most-hated-foods-instacart-data-2023-7965248>), many people dislike these:

Capers	Oysters	Brussels sprouts
Okra	Fennel	Anchovies
Bleu cheese	Olives	Mushrooms
Pickles	Cilantro	Mayonnaise
Coconut	Black licorice	

Are any of these food ingredients on your "extreme no" list? Can you also think of a food you love that would likely appear on many other people's "no" list?

STORY WITHIN A STORY—PART ONE

One of the interesting things the Gospel writer Mark does with these two stories is intertwine them. We do not hear the story about Jairus and his ailing daughter all at once. Mark tells us a little bit about Jairus, and how he cries out to Jesus about his sick daughter, in verses 21-24.

Before that story can be resolved, before Jesus can heal Jairus's daughter, something else happens that gets Jesus' attention—and ours. Mark leaves us in suspense: Will Jesus make it to Jairus's daughter? Will she be healed or not? We do not hear about Jairus and his daughter again until 11 verses later. But we learn something about Jesus through how Mark organizes and structures these two stories. Let's start at the beginning, with Jairus and his daughter.

FAITHFULNESS AND PLEADING

📖 **Read:** Mark 5: 21-24a (just the first sentence of v. 24)

Here we meet Jairus and learn why he is so anguished. Before Mark even tells us his name, we learn that Jairus is one of the "leaders of the synagogue" (v. 22). Why is this the very first thing Mark says? Is it important? It sure is—because of what has happened in the first four chapters of Mark.

In chapter 1, Jesus teaches in the synagogue (vv. 21-28), and it is no ordinary sermon. The people hearing him are "astounded" at Jesus' "authority" (v. 22). Some other words for *astounded* are "shocked," "amazed" and even "thunderstruck." Right then, a person *in the synagogue*, who has "an unclean spirit" (v. 23) and who has also been listening to Jesus, begins to scream! Jesus rebukes and casts the

unclean spirit out of the man (vv. 24-26). Again, the people who are present testify to Jesus' "authority" (v. 27).

In Mark 2, after Jesus performs another healing, he has a few run-ins with authority. Once, as Jesus is eating with "tax collectors and sinners" (vv. 15-16), some members of a certain sect of religious leaders, the Pharisees, challenge him about keeping the Mosaic Law properly. Another time, these leaders object when his disciples are plucking grain to eat, which is "not lawful on the Sabbath" (vv. 23-24). Jesus replies: "The sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath" (v. 27). In both cases, Jesus sidesteps their challenges.

In chapter 3, Jesus is back in the synagogue, healing and again (according to the Pharisees) breaking the law. The Pharisees "conspire ... to destroy him" (v. 6). In Mark 4 and the first part of chapter 5, Jesus continues to display authority and power, calming a storm (4:35-41) and healing a man who has been possessed by a violent, unclean spirit for so long that he made his home in the cemetery (5:1-20).

Share aloud or reflect:

2. Religious leaders at the time reacted strongly when they felt Jesus was breaking Mosaic law. To imagine what this must have felt like, let's consider: What sorts of things does our society consider "unclean" or unmentionable? What sorts of topics do we talk about openly now that were considered taboo in the past?

Now let's go back to our story-within-a-story in Mark 5—back to Jairus. He is a leader, but not one who comes to challenge Jesus or accuse him of breaking the law. Jairus is afraid because his daughter is so sick she is "at the point of death" (v. 23).

It seems Jairus has heard about Jesus' healing acts. Maybe he heard about the commotion and defeat of the unclean spirit in the synagogue (Mark 1). Maybe, because Jairus was a leader, he got wind of the healings Jesus had been doing and how the Pharisees had challenged Jesus about the law (chapters 2-4).

For whatever reason, Jairus had faith in Jesus because of Jesus' display of authority, power and healing. Apparently, so did a lot of others, because verse 21 notes that there is "a great crowd" around Jesus. Despite the large number of people around him, Jairus the leader falls at Jesus' feet and pleads for healing for his daughter.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. Here, Jairus falls at Jesus' feet. Elsewhere in the Bible, a Samaritan healed by Jesus falls at his feet. Mary (Martha's sister) sits at Jesus' feet to listen to his teaching. What do you think the Bible is telling us in these images of people being at Jesus' feet?

Jairus, a man with some measure of power and privilege as a synagogue leader, clearly humbles himself before Jesus. And Jairus doesn't wait to do this privately. He does it in front of the "great crowd," almost as soon as Jesus steps off the boat (v. 21). Jairus is desperate. Instead of using his power to try to order Jesus around, he kneels down and begs for help. Kneeling and begging are countercultural. This is not what we imagine people with power doing. This is not what we picture when we think of leaders.

But in this gentler, more compassionate world we're imagining as we work through this Bible study, we have our first display of vulnerability from a synagogue leader. Jairus goes against the grain. He physically stoops to give up his power in front of Jesus—for the sake of his daughter's healing.

Jesus, the Great Physician, responds to Jairus's

need and humility with divine compassion: “So [Jesus] went with [Jairus]” (v. 24a). Jesus slows down and accompanies him. This interplay between Jesus and Jairus is how faithfulness works.

As with Jairus and with the Faithful Woman (we’ll meet her next, in vv. 25-34), our faith is lived in the real world.

STORY WITHIN A STORY—PART TWO

In the NRSV and some other versions of the Bible, verse 24 is broken into two parts. (This is not the case in all English translations.) The first part, “So he went with him” (that is, Jesus went with Jairus) is printed along with verses 21-23. The rest of verse 24 starts a new paragraph: “And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him.”

Note that, in NRSV, the first part of verse 24 ends with a period, and the second starts with a capital letter. It does not read, “So [Jairus] went with [Jesus], and a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him.” It *could* read that way, but the translators of this Gospel have chosen to make a break here. Two sentences, not one.

This is a clue that the focus of the story is about to change.

THE FAITHFUL WOMAN

As Jesus and Jairus leave, the “large crowd follow[s]” and “press[es] in” on Jesus (v. 24b). It sounds like even more people are gathering around as the focus of the story shifts.

Suddenly, a woman not mentioned in the earlier verses is now at the center of the story. With this abrupt new character, the growing crowd and Jairus’s urgent concern about his daughter (I imagine Jairus being quite impatient, though the text does not say this), the scene becomes fast-paced and jam-packed. Personally, if I were among that great crowd, I would have sensory overload trying to keep up with what’s going on.

This biblical scene feels a lot like our world

today, as I mentioned at the beginning of this study. Many scholars note the hurried pace of Mark’s writing: So much is happening right “now” and “immediately.”

And now (see what I did there?!), we have a woman. She brings more suffering to this story already full of concern and worry. She has been called “the woman with the bleeding disorder” and “the woman with the issue of blood.” (You’ll recognize that last one if, like me, you grew up reading the King James Version [KJV] of the Bible.) However, we can follow Jesus’ lead in defining her, not by her disease, but by her faith (see v. 34). We can call her “The Faithful Woman.” Since Mark does not tell us her name, this description will be capitalized like a proper name.

Some scholars hold that because Mosaic Law stated that bodily discharge, even a woman’s normal monthly menstrual bleeding, made a person ritually unclean, such bleeding would also make those who came in contact with her ritually unclean.

However, other scholars, such as New Testament and Jewish Studies scholar Amy-Jill Levine and New Testament scholar Cecilia Wassen, believe impurity laws have been overemphasized as a concern—often to the point of contributing to anti-Jewish sentiments.

In an article titled “Jesus and the Hemorrhaging Woman in Mark 5:24-34: Insights from Purity Laws From the Dead Sea Scrolls,” Wassen argues that “according to the system of purity laws in the Scrolls, the hemorrhaging woman in the [Mark 5] story would not have transmitted impurity [and] most Jewish listeners or readers of Mark would not assume that...”

It is certainly notable that Mark does not call out the woman for being unclean. He does point out that the Faithful Woman has a serious health problem. Her bleeding is not monthly. It has lasted for an agonizing 12 years. During all that time, she has been seeking help for her condition, spending

all her money on medical treatment. The Faithful Woman has a triple burden: the undiagnosed problem causing the bleeding; the drain on her finances, and her steadily worsening health.

Burdened as she was, Mark tells us that this Faithful Woman has also “heard about Jesus” (v. 27). While Jesus, Jairus and the growing crowd are on the move, she sees an opening and pushes through the crowd to get close to Jesus. Her act of faith—like Jairus giving up power and falling at Jesus’ feet—is like “swimming upstream.” She goes against the grain as a woman at that time, boldly approaching Jesus in her vulnerability and need to seek healing.

One of the beautiful things about this scripture is that this woman, despite 12 years of disease and disappointment, still believes there is hope for her healing. She has heard of Jesus’ great authority and power, and believes he can do for her what no doctor has been able to do: “All I have to do is touch Jesus’ cloak, and he will heal me” (v. 28)

And Jesus does heal her. Jesus cares about the health and the healing of women and girls. Reminding her that she is God’s child, he says: “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease” (v. 34). He has already healed her with a touch that was initiated not by him, but from her, grabbing onto her courage and his garment in an act of faith.

Share aloud or reflect:

4. Does calling the woman Jesus healed “The Faithful Woman” instead of “the woman with the issue of blood” make a difference in how you see her and her faith?
5. Do you have an experience of taking a chance and continuing to believe, despite ongoing disappointment?

■ **Read:** Mark:5:24b-34

Mark’s story-within-a-story offers an amazing display of faith, sharing the healing that has happened by describing how Jesus is “immediately aware that power [has] gone forth from him” through his cloak. At this point, Jesus has not laid hands on the Faithful Woman or even seen her. Yet “immediately,” she “[feels] in her body” that, after all this time, she has finally been healed.

In this fast-paced, holy moment of healing, despite Jairus’s urgency and the large, pressing crowd, *Jesus stops*. He stops and begins looking around to see whose touch communicated such a level of faith and need—whose touch provoked his healing power.

I get chills when I think of it. But not for too long, because Mark’s play-by-play of the disciples’ reaction is just plain funny. Imagine their attitude: “Jesus, are you *serious*? Don’t you *see* all these people? Like, what do you even mean by asking who *touched* you?”

The action continues, and this holy moment almost exactly mirrors how the first part of this story-within-a-story began in verse 21. Just like Jairus, the Faithful Woman is in great need. She comes up to Jesus, falls down before him, and tells him everything. And just as he did with Jairus, Jesus responds to her with compassion.

STILL HEADING TO JAIRUS’ HOUSE

We were on the way to what we hoped would be a healing of Jairus’ daughter, before Mark stopped us to show us the Faithful Woman and her healing. And then, while Jesus is still speaking to her, people come to tell Jairus that his daughter has died.

■ **Read:** Mark 5:35-39

Do you have questions? I sure do. Is Jesus too late to save Jairus’ daughter? Is he too late because of the Faithful Woman? What is happening when the people tell Jairus not to bother “the teacher”

anymore (v. 35)? Are they shaming this leader of the synagogue who has already humbled himself? How could they be so insensitive? I don't think it's possible to overemphasize the emotional load of these five verses.

Jesus must sense that one of the things Jairus feels is fear, because Jesus tells him to not be afraid, and to “only believe” (v. 36).

Share aloud or reflect:

6. Imagine that you are Jairus in verse 37. How do you feel before Jesus says, “Do not fear, only believe”? What about after?

📖 Read: Mark 5:35-43

Thanks be to God! By the end of Mark's story-within-a-story, we learn that both Jairus's family and the Faithful Woman have received the healing they need. Toward the beginning of this session, under the heading “Story Within a Story—Part One,” I said that we could learn something about faith and about Jesus by the way Mark structures this part of his Gospel. These final verses are packed with information; it's more than just a happy ending.

Jesus says, “Only believe” to Jairus *after* Jairus sees Jesus heals the Faithful Woman. In fact, Jairus had a front-row seat. He was standing right there when Jesus remarked that power had gone out of him. Jairus watched the woman do exactly what he had done: kneel at Jesus' feet, make herself vulnerable in the presence of Jesus' power, ask for healing and confess that Jesus is able to heal. It's almost like Mark is underlining *our* need for healing, *our* vulnerability—the humanity of us *all* in the presence of the divine.

Throughout the book of Mark, Jesus has been displaying his authority and power, especially to those who need healing. The story-within-a-story format shows us that Jesus breaks down barriers.

Jesus doesn't run out of time. Jesus doesn't run out of healing. It's not as if he only has enough healing for *either* the Faithful Woman or Jairus' daughter. Jesus' divine compassion, mercy and healing have been flowing throughout this whole Gospel. And we need to hear Jesus' “Do not fear, only believe” as much as Jairus did. We know Jesus will be mocked in the face of death—his own death—just as the mourners begin mocking and laughing when he says that Jairus' daughter is not dead.

This willingness to go against the grain is something God makes manifest—sometimes in us, often in those around us. Just as with Jairus' and the Faithful Woman, our power to reach out is a manifestation of God's power. It is what GOD does in us.

CLOSING HYMN

“We've Come This Far by Faith” (*ELW* 633; *TFF* 197)

CLOSING PRAYER

O God, where hearts are fearful and constricted, grant courage and hope. Where anxiety is infectious and widening, grant peace and reassurance. Where impossibilities close every door and window, grant imagination and resistance. Where distrust twists our thinking, grant healing and illumination. Where spirits are daunted and weakened, grant soaring wings and strengthened dreams. All these things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. (*ELW*, p. 76; *ELW Prayer Book for the Armed Services*, p. 30). 🙏

Faithfulness

Session four

Faith risks: Jairus and the faithful woman

BY DENISE RECTOR

FOR LEADERS

Discussing issues that matter for our lives and the lives of others, whether in biblical times or now, could be fraught with tension. Here are some strategies to oversee conversations on challenging topics. As a leader, you may wish to read (or post) five conversational guidelines aloud to your group before the study starts.

GUIDELINES FOR GROUP CONVERSATION

- Try to use “I” statements.
- Listen actively, to understand what is being said. Don’t listen to debate a point or to come up with your own response. Being consciously engaged helps avoid misunderstandings.
- Assume that each speaker has the best intentions. Respond to the idea, not the person sharing the idea.
- If you tend to talk a lot in a group, stretch yourself by listening more. If you tend to listen a lot in a group, stretch yourself by talking more.
- Remember that each group member is an individual. Do not ask a person to speak for their perceived social, ethnic, political or any other group. Do not assume that a person is speaking for their perceived social, ethnic, political or any other group.

If the voices of one or two people are dominating the conversation, try saying something like, “We have heard from a couple of folks. Now let’s hear from some others who haven’t spoken yet. What do you see in this particular scripture, Mary?”

As a leader, you might also consider letting everyone share a view or opinion once, without interruption, before any one person gets to share a second time.

For those wanting more, another helpful resource is the ELCA social message, “Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy.” It includes a study guide, a leader’s guide and a Spanish version. You can access it online at: <https://elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Messages/Government>, or visit www.elca.org and search for “Government and Civic Engagement in the United States” or “Discipleship in a Democracy.”

Both Jairus and the Faithful Woman (otherwise known as the Woman With the Issue of Blood) push against societal norms. Faith—theirs and ours—involves risk and may lead us to actions that go against the grain of society.

The opening hymn, “Build a Longer Table” (*ACS 1062*), is from the newest ELCA worship resource, *All Creation Sings*. You may know it as “the purple book.” *ACS* includes expansive orders of worship, prayers and hymns. A braille version is available, as well as guitar accompaniment. If you do not have a copy of *All Creation Sings*, you can use a smart-phone to search for this song on YouTube.

Scholars, especially those who are women, are becoming increasingly interested in unnamed women in both the Old and New Testaments, and the roles these unnamed women play in Scripture.

As a leader, you may want to consider: What does it mean that these women exist in the text without their names being noted? What might that say about biblical scholarship and translation? Among the scholars exploring these essential

women, their culture and other important questions is Wilda (“Wil”) C. Gafney. Her two-volume set, *Womanist Midrash*, includes: Volume 1: *A Reinroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* and Volume 2: *A Reinroduction to the Women of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings*.

Note that for the purposes of this study, “Faithful Woman” is capitalized as we would capitalize a proper name. Some commentaries call her “the woman with the bleeding disorder,” or “the woman with the issue of blood,” or something similar. Jesus, however, defines her *not* by her disease, but *by her faith* (see Mark 5:34). Perhaps an affirming, capitalized descriptor is the closest we can come to addressing her with dignity.

A discussion of ritual purity as part of the Mosaic Law is in the leader guide to session 3 of this study (Acts 10, the story of Peter and Cornelius).

The closing hymn, “We’ve Come This Far by Faith” (*ELW* 633; *TFP* 197), is an African American gospel standard. It echoes the faith of Jairus and the Faithful Woman (the woman with the issue of blood). Singing or reading the words of this hymn can help a group to express our dependence on God, and God’s faithfulness, in difficult times.

SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

1. Ask participants to read the study and complete the questions before they arrive.
2. Sing the Opening Hymn or pray the Opening Prayer.
3. Ask each person to share one memorable point and/or one question they have from the lesson.
4. Discuss the questions group members have raised, as time allows.
5. End with the Closing Prayer or the Closing Hymn.

A LITTLE LONGER (45–60 MINUTES)

1. Sing the Opening Hymn and pray the Opening Prayer.
2. Read through the study as a group. Ask a group member to read the scripture passages aloud where indicated.
3. Invite one or two responses to the questions in each section.
4. End with the Closing Prayer. Sing the Closing Hymn if time allows.

TWO-HOUR STUDY (WORKS WELL WITH LARGER GROUPS ALSO)

1. Sing the Opening Hymn and pray the Opening Prayer.
2. Read through the study as a group. Ask a group member to read the scripture passages aloud where indicated.
3. Break into small groups of two or three to discuss the questions in each section. (People can remain in their group for all of the questions, or switch groups as they prefer.) Take 5 minutes to report out on the conversation before moving to the next section.
4. Invite participants to share a favorite hymn or contemporary song that reflects the theme of the lesson.
5. End with the Closing Prayer and the Closing Hymn. 🌿