

*Desperately Seeking*  
A Pentecost 4 Sermon  
Mark 5:21-43  
Sunday, June 28, 2009  
by Dr. Frank Trotter

This past Friday, June 26, is the day that “according to legend, the Pied Piper lured children out of the city of Hamelin, Germany, and to their death [or, as one version says it, “to their permanent disappearance – no one ever saw them again.”] The story goes that at some point earlier in the year, a man dressed in a colorful coat appeared in Hamelin, offering to get rid of the rats that were plaguing the town. The townspeople agreed to a set price. The man played a song on a flute, and lured all the rats out of the houses and barns and into the nearby River Weser, where they all drowned. But the townspeople were annoyed at his unconventional methods, and refused to pay him. So on June 26, he returned to town, dressed like a hunter with a red cap. It was a Sunday, and all the adults were in church. He got out his flute and began to play, and 130 children followed him out of the town, through a gate and into a mountain, and were never seen again.”<sup>1</sup> The legend always ends with the parents and grandparents of desperately searching for their lost children – to no avail.

Research tells us that the story of the Pied Piper was first recorded in a chorus book in the 14<sup>th</sup> century but that it was then lost for two hundred years. The oldest known account, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, reads: “In the year of 1284, on the day of Saints John and Paul on 26 June, 130 children born in Hamelin were seduced by a piper, dressed in all kinds of colours, and lost at the place of execution near the *koppen*,”<sup>2</sup> the hills around the city.

Popular versions of the story have been written over the years by the Brothers Grimm, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Robert Browning, and if you go into a wood carver’s shop in the Black Forest today you will almost certainly find a version or two of the Pied Piper.

A majority of historians who analyze folk mythology believe the story has a kernel of truth in it based on some historic event in Hamelin’s history. Some

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<sup>1</sup> “The Writer’s Almanac with Garrison Keillor,” Friday, June 26, 2009, [http://www.elabs7.com/functions/message\\_view.html?mid=792815&mlid=499&siteid=20130&uid=c789941005](http://www.elabs7.com/functions/message_view.html?mid=792815&mlid=499&siteid=20130&uid=c789941005).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

believe that it is a story about a plague or epidemic and that the Piper represented death or the Devil. In other traditions, a tale describes how the missing children joined a children's military operation, perhaps during the Children's Crusade, and that the Piper, a Christian, was their charismatic military leader. Another theory is based upon the historic colonization of Eastern Europe which began in Lower Germany. In this scenario, the Piper is a wealthy landowner, who, along with other land barons sought to recruit settlers from Germany and other western European countries to move to Eastern Europe. Perhaps the Piped Piper lured away the town's young people, young adults, or even its citizens (who were all children of the city) with promises of land.

The poignant part of the story in all of its versions, of course, is the heartbreak of the parents for these children who have vanished, these families who desperately seek for their sons and daughters to no avail.

The lesson we've heard this morning from the Gospel of Mark is about two people who are desperately seeking – one is a father whose young daughter is at the point of death; and the second is a woman who interrupts Jesus as he is on his way to visit the teenage girl. All of these stories are about faith and fear, about believing in the impossibilities or staying stuck in hard-headedness or hard-heartedness.

The father's child is only 12 years old, barely a woman, and is on the edge of her whole future as an adult. However, a mysterious illness has touched her suggesting that her life span may be short. Jairus, her father, is a person with both respect and prestige in the community. In fact, he is a leader of the synagogue and has sought help from the very best doctors – without any signs of help. In desperation, he comes to a man he's heard of who seems to be not much more than a traveling folk-healer, a man who is certainly not approved of by the religious authorities in the synagogue. But when he finds Jesus, he implores him, "Come and lay your hands on my daughter. For she is at the point of death, and I pray that she may be made well and live." And Jesus agrees to go and see the girl.

Some historians believe that before the scientific age parents were reluctant to become too emotionally attached to their children, because so many of them, before vaccinations, hospitals, and prenatal care, died young. Some records indicate that as many as sixty percent of live births did not live beyond their mid-teens during biblical times. Yet this father was not willing

to give up on his daughter. Although he had surely tried every medical authority and every remedy suggested to him, Jairus finally decides to seek the help of the preacher and healer named Jesus – knowing full well that going to this controversial man may well bring ridicule and scorn from the establishment of which he is a fixture.

Theologian Kate Huey says, “It seems to me that desperation, not faith, drives the synagogue leader to Jesus...”<sup>3</sup> But no matter the reason why he comes seeking help, Jesus agrees to go with him to see the girl – only to be interrupted by a second woman who is also desperately seeking his healing. In her case, she has been weakened almost to the point of death for suffering hemorrhages for twelve years – as long as Jairus’ daughter had been alive. In her desperation, she pushes through the crowd around Jesus trying to get as near to him as she can.

In a time when health care is one of the most hotly debated issues in both California and the nation, it’s interesting that both of these woman have fallen through the safety net of their own times. Jairus’ doctors cannot find a cause for the girl’s disease, and this middle-aged woman has spent all of her resources on the very best medical help she can find – with no success.

Was it faithfulness, fear, hope, or desperation that made her push through the crowd and reach out to touch him? What we know is that the mantra that kept driving through her heart and mind was the thought, “If I can but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” And so it happened.

Jesus knows what has happened, turns, and seeks the one who has been healed. She could have slipped away, unseen, but her gratitude compels her to come to the healer. With fear and trembling, she tells him what she has done, and he says, “Daughter, your faith has made you well,” he tells her. “Go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

Unfortunately, in the brief moments that Jesus used to help the middle-aged woman, news comes from Jairus’ house that it is too late – his daughter has

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<sup>3</sup> Kate Huey, “Healing Powers”, *Weekly Seeds* (Congregational Vitality Initiative, Local Church Ministries, United Church of Christ), <http://i.ucc.org/StretchYourMind/OpeningtheBible/WeeklySeeds/tabid/81/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/206/Healing-Powers-Jun-2228.aspx>. Rev. Kate Huey is minister for covenantal stewardship in Local Church Ministries in Cleveland, Ohio (United Church of Christ).

succumbed to her illness. But Jesus, in overhearing the message, says, “Do not fear, only believe.” Somehow, Jairus does.

When they come to the house, Jesus is greeted with derision when he tells them the girl is not dead. Taking the girl’s parents and the disciples into the house with him, he takes the girl by her hand and says, “Little girl, I say to you, get up!” Immediately, she opens her eyes and is restored to the joy and love of her family.

Theologian William Loader says, “If we remain at the level of the sheer miracle, we can become preoccupied with questions like: why is this useful ability not more widely available? how might it have happened? did it really happen? is it a legendary story designed to echo the feats of Elijah and Elisha? All questions have their place. But the sacredness of this text lies less in what history it might purport to tell and more in what it celebrates. It celebrates that the human yearning for new life, set out in dreams and visions for the climax of history, can find its fulfilment in being connected to Jesus. It celebrates that the reality of women in community, the suffering and deprivation, the promise of emerging womanhood and all which that entails, belongs firmly within the embrace of the gospel.”<sup>4</sup>

In the mid-1970’s, David Berkowitz killed six women and injured seven others in New York City. He became known as the “Son of Sam” and the letters he wrote to the police and media were filled with blood, darkness, and death. Over the years of his imprisonment, he has made an unlikely friendship with a crime victim advocate. Suddenly, David Berkowitz began writing letters of an entirely different nature, letters in which he seems to be searching for a little piece of atonement for all of the devastation and horror he inflicted. I do not know if he will find Jesus Christ, but it seems to me that he is seeking him desperately.<sup>5</sup>

This week, the media of the world has flocked to Los Angeles at the sudden and tragic death of pop star Michael Jackson at the age of 50. Here was one of the most gifted musicians of our time, but a man troubled by an abusive father, a man insecure with how he looked, a man who was ever desperate to

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<sup>4</sup> William Loader, “First Thoughts on Year B Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Pentecost 4,” <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MkPentecost4.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Monica Rohr, “Notorious Serial Killer Expresses Remorse,” AOL News, June 23, 2009, <http://news.aol.com/article/son-of-sam-letters/545505>.

have the approval and adulation of the crowd. Whatever you think of Michael Jackson, I see him as a man who wanted to be loved – and I pray that God would grant him peace after the tumult of his life here on earth.

Henry David Thoreau, the famous nineteenth century naturalist and philosopher, said that “Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them.”<sup>6</sup> That is the tragedy of life, isn’t it? To have lived one’s life and never found the means to let one’s song be heard...

Horatio Nelson, a Vice Admiral for the British Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars, said, “Desperate affairs require desperate measures.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps that’s the message for all of us who are in need of healing. If Jairus had not taken a huge risk and trusted Jesus, or if the unnamed woman had failed to push her way through the crowd, their lives may have ended in desperation.

William Burroughs, an American writer of the twentieth century, said, “Desperation is the raw material of drastic change. Only those who can leave behind everything they have ever believed in can hope to escape.”<sup>8</sup>

And that is the good news for today.

Thanks be to God. Amen

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<sup>6</sup> Henry David Thoreau, from the essay “Economy,” <http://www.trivia-library.com/b/origins-of-sayings-the-mass-of-men-lead-lives-of-quiet-desperation.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> “Horatio Nelson Quotes,” [http://www.icelebz.com/quotes/horatio\\_nelson/](http://www.icelebz.com/quotes/horatio_nelson/).

<sup>8</sup> William S. Burroughs, <http://www.abolitionist.com/william-burroughs.html>.