

One Sunday morning a mother went in to wake her son and tell him it was time to get ready for church, to which he replied, 'I'm not going.'

'Why not?' she asked.

'I'll give you two good reasons,' he said. '(1) They don't like me, and (2), I don't like them.'

His mother replied, 'I'll give YOU two good reasons why YOU SHOULD go to church. (1) You're 59 years old, and (2) you're the pastor!'

As a pastor, that has always brought a smile to my face. Not that I have ever felt that way, in this congregation. Because I haven't. But it certainly is not easy to serve in a place where you are not liked.

But I am not the first person in this room to experience the difficulties of life, whether that is from a tough job experience, or a tough relationship experience, or a challenging life experience. Most of us sitting in this room, know how hard life can be from time to time. When life gets hard for you, what do you do? Where do you turn?

In our scripture for today we meet two people for whom life has become hard. It has become desperately hard. We meet a leader of a synagogue, Jairus, whose daughter is at the point of death. And we meet an un-named woman, who has suffered from an illness that would have isolated her and kept her pushed to the edges of that society.

Two people for whom life has become desperately hard. Two people from different perspectives. Two people from different sides of the tracks. Two people from different social and economic classes. One of the things these stories remind me of, is that life can be difficult for anyone of us. It doesn't matter if we are wealthy and connected. It doesn't matter if we are poor and outcast. The difficulties of life can strike any one of us.

When they strike, what can we do?

One of the things that both of these people did, is that they turned to God? They turned to God, believing that their relationship with God could make a difference. And it did.

If you are here, and life is difficult for you today, what are you doing to turn to God? What are you doing to invite God to be a part of your journey, your struggle? Are you willing to work at your relationship with God, so God can help you through your difficulties?

There is a pastor in North Carolina who has taught his congregation to "Twitter". He encouraged them to bring their lap-tops and smart phones (like Blackberry's and I-Phones) to church. In worship, he helped them learn how to "twitter".

Then he encouraged them to "twitter" questions to him, while he was preaching. He encouraged them to "twitter" to friends and family members when they were struggling. When asked what this has to do with faith he said, "Well, on the one hand it doesn't really have anything to do with faith. But on the other hand, if I can get people to think about God and to send one message of faith to another person, at least once a day, then it helps make God present each day in what they do.

Mark is telling us these stories to remind us that God does love us. Mark is telling us these stories to remind us that God does want to be a part of our lives. What are you doing, to let God be a part of your life?

A second thing this passage reminds us is that in the midst of tough times, we need to reach out. The woman had already reached out to others, to professionals and to friends. Jairus has reached out to others, to friends and to family. Are you willing to reach out to others? Are you willing to let others become a part of your life and walk with you?

At Sun Prairie UMC over the past couple of years, we have invited and challenged you to become a part of a study or a part of a small group. It is a way in which we learn to reach out and walk with others.

This is so important for us, because we live in a society that has taught us to be independent and not need others. Most of us have taken that to an extreme and now find ourselves isolated. We are desperate for real, honest, authentic and healthy communities, but we don't know how to do it.

But when we can experience a healthy community, it can literally change our lives. One day a teacher asked her students to list the names of the other students in the room on two sheets of paper, leaving a space between each name. Then she told them to think of the nicest thing they could say about each of their classmates and write it down.

It took the remainder of the class period to finish their assignment, as students left the room each one handed in the papers. That Saturday, the teacher wrote down the name of each student on a separate sheet of paper, and listed what everyone else had said about that individual.

On Monday, she gave each student his or her list. Before long, the entire class was smiling. "Really?" she heard whispered. "I never knew that I meant anything to anyone! And, "I didn't know others liked me so much," were most of the comments.

No one mentioned those papers in class again. The teacher never knew if they discussed them after class or with their parents. But it didn't matter. The exercise had accomplished its purpose. The students were happy with themselves and with one another. They had become connected with one another. Eventually, that group of students moved on.

Several years later, one of the students was killed in Vietnam. His teacher attended the funeral of that young man. She had never seen a serviceman in a military coffin before. He looked so handsome, so mature.

The church was packed with his friends. One by one those who loved him took a last walk by the coffin. The teacher was one of the last to come by the coffin. As she stood there, one of the soldiers who acted as a pallbearer came up and said, "Were you Mark's Math teacher?"

She nodded, "Yes." Then he said, "Mark talked about you a lot."

After the funeral, most of Mark's former classmates went together to the luncheon. Mark's mother and father were also there, obviously waiting to speak to his teacher. "We want to show you something," his father said, taking a wallet out of his pocket. "They found this on Mark when he was killed. We thought you might recognize it."

Opening the billfold, he carefully removed two worn pieces of notebook paper that had obviously been taped, folded and refolded many times. The teacher knew without looking that the papers were the ones in which she had listed all the good things each of Mark's classmates had said about him. "Thank you so much for doing that," Mark's mother said. "As you can see, Mark treasured it."

All of Mark's former classmates started to gather around. Charlie smiled sheepishly and said, "I still have my list. It's in the top drawer of my desk at home.

Chuck's wife said, "Chuck asked me to put his in our wedding album."

"I have mine, too," Marilyn said. "It's in my diary."

Then Vicki, another classmate, reached into her pocketbook, took out her wallet and showed her worn and frazzled list to the group. "I carry this with me at all times," Vicki said and without batting an eyelash, she continued, "I think we all saved our lists. It reminds me of a time when I was a part of something special."

That is what being a part of a community can do for us. It can claim us. It can give us meaning. It can lead us through tough, challenging times, when life does become hard.

If you are here today, and life is hard. It is my hope that you will find a way to do what those in this story do; turn to God and turn to others. Remember, you are loved. God cares deeply for you.

Thanks be to God.

Amen