

### ***Perfect Timing***

In the name of him who is good to those who wait for him, dear friends in Christ: It's impossible to overstate the importance of proper timing. It can mean the difference between a perfectly poached egg and an unappetizing glop of goo, between a joke that's hilarious and one that falls flat, and between an invitation to dine, as in "Let's eat, grandma!" and a conspiracy to engage in cannibalism, as in "Let's eat grandma!". So much depends on proper timing.

And sometimes the timing has to be absolutely perfect. Take for example the engine in your car. If one of the sparkplugs is firing just the tiniest fraction of a second before it should, that piston would actually be fighting against the others, at best drastically reducing the engine's efficiency and at worst destroying the whole thing. Or take the suspense in a storyline. How many times have you seen a show or read a book in which there was countdown to some disaster, and the hero managed to save the day with only a second to spare? It wouldn't have been nearly as engaging if he solved the problem of the ticking time bomb with an hour and a half still on the clock, would it? No. Some things call for perfect timing.

And that brings me to today's Gospel and to our Lord Jesus, whose timing is always absolutely perfect – even though it may not seem like that to us at the time. The story takes place in the city of Capernaum, which was Jesus' primary base of operations during his Galilean ministry. Typically he'd spend a few weeks there, and then go off on a teaching tour to other places around the lake; always returning to Capernaum. And while he was in Capernaum, he would preach regularly at the synagogue there. It was the synagogue for which Jairus was responsible. Our text calls him a synagogue leader, which we might think of as being the president of the congregation or the head elder. The point is that he knew Jesus fairly well. He was the one responsible for setting up services and calling upon Jesus to teach there. It means too that he personally witnessed many of the healing miracles that Jesus performed. So when his daughter fell ill, he knew that Jesus could heal her.

The problem was that Jesus had gone away on one of his preaching tours, and there was no indication when he might be back. So for Jairus and his wife, their daughter's illness seems to be a case of terribly bad timing. Picture them at her bedside, watching her grow progressively worse, her labored breathing becoming nothing more than shallow gasping, her strength ebbing away. If only she can hang on until Jesus returns. With all their might, that's what they pray for. And no doubt they've got lookouts posted down by the shore to bring them any word – any sign of hope. But as the minutes tick by, it looks less and less like their daughter is going to make it. The heartache they feel is almost unbearable.

And then, just when all seems lost, the hopeful news comes. The boat that Jesus left in several days ago has been sighted. It's still too far away to tell who exactly is on it; but Jairus has to take the chance that Jesus is aboard. Leaving his deathly ill daughter in her mother's care, he runs down to the shore where he finds a large crowd already gathering. Apparently he's not the only one who will be clamoring for Jesus' attention. No matter; he's convinced that Jesus will agree that his daughter's situation is by far the most urgent case pending. By using the leverage of his elevated social standing where it will work and his elbows on whom it won't, he manages to push his way to the front of the crowd. Still, the distant boat seems to take forever to make its landing. "Please hurry up, will you? Don't those guys know that this is a matter of life and death? ... Well, of course not; how could they?" And so it becomes a prayer.

And the whole time Jairus is struggling with the shifting crowd to keep his place up at the front. At length, he's relieved to see that Jesus is indeed aboard the boat. "There may be hope after all – if only we can get there in time. If only I can get to Jesus first."

As soon as the boat runs up on the sandy beach, Jairus lunges forward. He falls at the feet of Jesus with his desperate plea. "You must come at once. There's not a second to lose." Jesus readily agrees to come; but it's awfully slow going. The rest of the crowd isn't cooperating at all. Everyone is still thronging around him, shouting out questions, describing their ailments and complaints; some are trying to give him gifts in thanks for things he'd done for them in the past. Others are just celebrating his return – but everyone, it seems, wants a piece of Jesus and a moment of his time. And so Jairus is doing everything short of pulling Jesus along with one hand while, shoulder down, he plows through the mass of humanity like an offensive lineman making a hole for the ball carrier.

And suddenly Jesus stops behind him. "Who touched me?" he asks. It seems to be a ridiculous question. Dozens of people have put their hands on his shoulder or brushed up against him in the short time since his return. The disciples point out this obvious truth. And if you put yourself in Jairus' sandals, you're thinking, "Who cares who touched you? We haven't got time for this." But Jesus is determined. He stands looking around in the crowd for the person he knows has just experienced a miraculous healing. After what seems another eternity to Jairus, a trembling woman comes forward. She's terrified that she's done something wrong – and if you understand the social customs of the time, she has. But no longer able to conceal her identity, she falls at Jesus' feet and goes into a lengthy explanation. For twelve years she's been afflicted with a profoundly personal problem that involves constant bleeding. Besides the obvious deleterious effects to her health like anemia, under Jewish law the condition has rendered her perpetually unclean. As a result she's had no contact with other people, no family life to speak of, no participation in the worship life of the community. She's been subject to a miserable, lonely existence – one that has also left her destitute because she spent everything she owned on treatments that only made her condition worse. So yes, in order to get to Jesus she had to break the rules. She, an unclean woman, who shouldn't have even be here in a public place, had to fight her way through the unsuspecting crowd in order to touch a holy man she believed could cure her. And now she's had to tell the whole world what she's done, not to mention a bunch of other embarrassing details of her life that she would much rather have kept to herself. But Jesus surprises her. Rather than rebuke her for violating a number of ceremonial rules as she expects he will, Jesus commends her for her great faith and bids her go in peace, her health fully restored.

But again, place yourself in Jairus' sandals. You're listening to all this, and you can't believe what you're hearing. You're thinking, "Lady, you had this problem for twelve years! It was hardly life threatening. Couldn't you have waited just a few more minutes? And Jesus, what are you thinking? Can't you see that my daughter's situation is so much more pressing than standing here in the street listening to this woman tell her whole pathetic life story?"

And right then is when word comes from the house. It's too late. Don't bother Jesus any more. Your daughter is dead. Under normal circumstances such information is the worst thing a parent can hear; but in this case it's exacerbated by having hope raised to such heights at the last minute – now only to be dashed by what seems to be a lot of completely meaningless and wasteful interference. So Jairus is filled to overflowing with a combination of grief, anger, frustration, and bitter disappointment in himself, no doubt; but even more in Jesus. If only he had not gone away to begin with. If only he had hurried up. If only he hadn't stopped to deal with that woman and her comparatively unimportant problem, my daughter would be alive.

But what I want you to see is that he who commands the forces of nature like the wind and waves is also in command of time. It was the Lord's will to bring Jairus, a man who trusted in Jesus, to this point of desperation, doubt, and fear precisely so that he could increase his faith farther still. It's just as he's about to be washed overboard in one of life's worse storms that Jesus puts his hand on Jairus' shoulder and says, "I'm not done yet. Keep trusting me. You trusted me to save you daughter while she was alive. Now trust me to save her from the grip of death."

You know how the story turns out. I don't need to repeat the happy ending. What's important is that we apply the lesson of the story to our lives. It's about our Lord's use of time. It took an illness lasting twelve long years to bring a certain woman to the place that she was willing to abandon hope in everything else, risk public humiliation, and reach out in faith to Jesus. For Jairus, it took being taken to the place where he thought it was too late to prove to him that for those who trust Jesus, it's never too late.

The Lord's timing is perfect. When something goes wrong, we often think, "Oh! This couldn't have happened at a worse time!" Other times we're likely to think that the Lord's priorities are out of whack. We wonder why he seems to be overlooking what we consider to be the most urgent matters facing our families, our church, and our nation. And still other times we think, "Okay, this has gone on long enough. I don't think I can take any more. Lord, end it now."

All such thoughts are wrong. All such thoughts demonstrate a decided lack of faith. The Lord who controls all things, also controls the times and seasons. He knew exactly when in the history of this world to send his Son into our flesh. He knew exactly when to have him carry the cross for our sins. He knew exactly when to raise him up from the dead and exalt him to his throne of power. And he knows exactly when he will send him back to judge the living and the dead. It will happen in the Lord's perfect timing. And the same is true for the times and seasons that he has appointed for each of us. All are designed by him to bring us to the happy ending.

May we then use the time he's assigned us for what's it's for: to repent of our sins and our lack of trust, to build ourselves up in holy faith through the use of the means of grace, to bear witness to the salvation we have in Christ Jesus, and to share the love of God with others while we await with quiet confidence the salvation of the Lord – for it will surely come in the Lord's perfect timing. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***