**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**THE STRENGTH OF FLICKERING FAITH**

**Luke 8:40-56**

**INTRODUCTION**

Please open your Bibles to Luke 8. Today we continue our series in the Gospel of Luke called “Finding Certainty in a World of Doubt”.

Years ago, the pastor in the church I was attending in Hamilton told a story of a friend who was suffering from cancer. This friend went to a church that taught the “Health, Wealth, and Prosperity Gospel”, which teaches that God has riches, success, and all kinds of worldly flourishing to pour out on you, *if only* you would have enough faith. According to these teachers, the key to unlocking all these blessings is a robust and confident faith.

To the church’s credit, they had many people praying for this man with cancer. That’s one good thing that’s come out of that movement. But when prayer didn’t result in the cancer going away, that was when the evil implications of that false gospel really came out. The man wasn’t told to take comfort in the goodness and sovereignty of a God who does all things for our good, including the giving of cancer. Instead, he was condemned for not having enough faith to believe that God could and would heal him.

Sadly, this is what many Christians have come to believe. They have come to believe the lie that God only helps those who show him enough faith. As a result, when we don’t have much faith, we feel condemned, and we feel alone.

Have you ever struggled with your faith? Have you ever found it hard to come to Jesus? Perhaps you’ve doubted whether he’s able to help you. Perhaps you’ve doubted whether he’s willing to help you. Perhaps you have felt unworthy to come to Jesus because you think your faith is just too weak. You’ve come to believe that Jesus only helps those who have a strong faith, not a faith that seems to weaken and waver like yours.

In our text today, Jesus is going to comfort those who never feel like they have enough faith. Jesus wants you to know that, though he wants you to trust him completely, he doesn’t condemn you if you don’t. He is ready to help not only those who have an unshakeable faith in him, but those who waver in their belief in him. As the prophet Isaiah wrote about the ministry of the Christ:

“A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.” (Isa. 42:3)

Some people have faith like a raging fire, but others only have faith like a faintly burning wick. While Jesus wants our faith to burn hot and bright, he gently comes alongside those with a flickering faith and nurtures it until it becomes strong.

The title of this message is **The Strength of Flickering Faith**. My aim today is to show you that **Even Weak Faith has Power if it Leads You to Come to Jesus.**

(1) **DESPERATE FAITH**

Our text today begins in verse 40 with Jesus returning from the country of the Gerasenes, where he had just healed the man who was possessed by a legion of demons. The townspeople there had witnessed Jesus’ immense power, and their response was one of great fear. They were terrified of Jesus, and they asked him to leave. Jesus did leave, but not before he left them with a gift: the man he had healed was to remain in the city, bearing witness to the truth and power of Christ, in order that more people would come to put their trust in Jesus.

On returning to the Judean side of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus is greeted by a very different group of people. A crowd was gathered around the shore, waiting there to welcome him.

But as he disembarked from the boat and readied himself to minister to this crowd, verse 41 says that “there came a man named Jairus, who was a ruler of the synagogue. And falling at Jesus’ feet, he implored him to come to his house”.

This is the first time in the Gospel of Luke where a member of the religious elite comes to Jesus for help. Throughout Luke’s Gospel, Luke shows us that such people tended to oppose Jesus, rather than support him. This was demonstrated most clearly by the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were like “the moral police”. They made it their life’s purpose to ensure that the Jewish people remained faithful to the law of Moses. They did this by creating endless lists of rules to cover every possible implication of the Torah, and by closely watching the lives of the people around them to make sure that they were in conformity to those rules.

Jesus was no exception. The Pharisees watched Jesus and his disciples like hawks, waiting to pick on the slightest infraction of the law, and every time they did, Jesus’ reply was essentially the same: “Don’t you know that the law is all about me? I am not breaking the law. I am showing you how it was meant to be followed.”

Jesus was a religious radical. He challenged the status quo, and he called people everywhere to stop trusting in their traditions and to start trusting in him. The Pharisees didn’t like this. In fact, they hated Jesus for it. They saw him as undermining the religious society that they had built, a society in which they received the most honour and recognition.

This would have been true of people like Jairus. Jairus was “a ruler of the synagogue”, which meant that he was the main elder responsible for administrating the worship and teaching that happened at the synagogue. He possessed a key religious position in the city, a position he rose to based on the same religious moralism of the Pharisees.

For Jairus to visit Jesus, he was risking his reputation and his status as a religious leader. Recall the story in the Gospel of John where we find a Pharisee named Nicodemus who visited Jesus under the cover of night. He made sure he only visited Jesus at a time when no one would discover that he was taking interest in Jesus, because he wasn’t quite ready to risk his reputation and status by associating with Jesus.

But here, we don’t see Jairus visiting Jesus under cover of night so that no one can see. Instead, we see him visiting Jesus in broad day light in the middle of a massive crowd of people who could all see what he was doing. Why did he do that? Why was he willing to risk his reputation and status by coming to Jesus for help in the middle of the day?

The answer is found in verse 42: “for he had an only daughter, about twelve years of age, and she was dying.”

There is something about suffering that completely changes our priorities in life. One day, you’re busy managing your business, or working on getting a promotion, or wishing your young kids would grow up faster so you can go on that trip you’ve always wanted to go on, and the next day, you find out that your kid has cancer, or your parents got in a tragic car accident, or your spouse has decided to leave you.

When faced with trials like these, the first word on our lips is often, “Why?” Why would God allow that to happen? Why has God caused such pain? Why does it feel as if God has left us, and that we are left to face these trials alone?

To some extent, we won’t ever know exactly why, because we are not God. We do not know everything like he does. We do not possess perfect wisdom and goodness and love like he does. There is great mystery behind God’s providence, a mystery that can only be penetrated by God’s divine knowledge and purity.

But here, we see at least part of the answer to the question, “Why”. God allows us to suffer the hard trials of life, because sometimes, that’s what it takes for us to come to Jesus.

It’s unlikely that Jairus would have come to Jesus without his daughter’s suffering. He had too much to lose. But because of her suffering, he was so desperate to get help that he was willing to sacrifice everything by coming to Jesus. The same can often be true of us. We are so wired to live independently, so habituated to take care of our own problems, that we never truly turn to Jesus for help until we are *desperate*. Sometimes, that’s what it takes. It takes knowing that there’s absolutely nothing we can do in order for us to turn to the One who can do something about it.

When you come to Jesus in the midst of your suffering, your faith may not be very strong. In fact, it may seem like you’re barely holding on. You may question why God would allow such a trial that would so drastically shake your faith in him. But God doesn’t give you trials to weaken your faith. He gives you trials to strengthen your faith. He gives you the trial so that you’ll stop depending on yourself, and start depending on him instead.

Are you suffering today? Have you been grieved by a difficult trial, perhaps the most difficult trial you’ve ever faced? If so, then have you come to Jesus? Have you come to him with a desperate faith, knowing that he alone has the power to deliver you from your trial?

One of the ways we can come to Jesus is through prayer. At any moment of any day, we have access to the Lord of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things and the lover of your soul. He is waiting to help you carry your burdens. In the midst of your suffering, have you come to Jesus through prayer? Have you come to him with a desperate faith, knowing that he can do what you could never do yourself?

We also come to Jesus through the church. The church is “the body of Christ”. In the church, you find the hands, feet, and mouths of Jesus in your fellow believers. In the church, you find the shepherds whom Jesus appointed to keep watch over your souls. Yes, the church is flawed. We don’t always get it right. But despite the flaws in the church, it remains the dearest place on earth, because it belongs to Jesus. It has been purchased by his blood, and it will be kept by his power until he returns.

One of the main barriers to going to others with our suffering and struggles is our fear of what it will do to our reputation. We’re afraid that people will think less of us because of our struggles, or that we’ll lose our place of honour and respect in the church. When we struggle with thoughts like that, we need to be more like Jairus and say, “I don’t care about those things any more. I need Jesus so desperately that I’m willing to give up all of that in order to find help.”

If you’re suffering, don’t keep it to yourself. Come to Jesus through prayer, and come to Jesus through his people.

(2) **TIMID FAITH**

Fear of what sharing our struggles with others may do to our reputation may be one barrier to coming to Jesus, but it’s not the only one. There’s another: the feeling that you’re just not good enough. This leads to our second point: timid faith.

Verse 42b tells us that, as Jesus followed Jairus to his home, the crowd went with him. This crowd of people may not have been ready to become disciples of Jesus, but they were committed to seeing Jesus do something amazing.

But there was one in the crowd who had a different reason for following Jesus. Luke tells us in verse 43 that “there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and though she had spent all her living on physicians, she could not be healed by anyone.”

Luke tells us a few important details about this woman who followed Jesus. The first is that she had “a discharge of blood” for twelve years, which was probably a hemorrhage in her uterus that led to consistent, uncontrollable bleeding. Leviticus 15 says that a woman who had a discharge of blood outside of her regular menstrual cycle was unclean for those days. To be “unclean” was to be unable to participate in religious activities, including going to synagogue and visiting the Temple.

What’s more, Leviticus 15 also tells us that, if anyone touched her, or touched anything that she had touched, then they would become unclean as well. This meant that she was excluded not only from religious life, but social life in general as well, as no one wanted to risk the chance of becoming unclean around her. She must have been an extremely lonely woman, one who had enjoyed very little social interaction for twelve long years.

The second thing Luke tells us in verse 43 is that she had spent all her living on physicians, to no avail. Not only was she socially isolated. She was also poor, with no hope that life would turn around for her. Doctors had tried their best to heal her, but one after another, they had all failed. In short, we can see how this seemingly insignificant physical condition had cost her everything: her relationships, her money, her health, and her hope.

But now that Jesus was here, perhaps there was reason to hope. Perhaps he could do what no one else had been able to do. But she had a problem: how could she, an unclean woman, approach such a revered teacher and ask him for help? She couldn’t do it. She felt like she wasn’t good enough. After all, why would a great teacher and healer like Jesus ever bother with her, an unclean and poor woman who had no hope? She must have thought to herself that he would never bother with her.

But that didn’t stop her. She came up with a plan. Perhaps, in the press of the great crowd around Jesus, she thought she could touch him and escape unnoticed, and perhaps a simple touch would be enough to heal her. So that’s what she did. Verse 44 says that “she came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, and immediately her discharge of blood ceased.”

Just like that, she did it! Her plan worked. She must have been ready to run home and celebrate. But before she had a chance to get away, Jesus stops and says in verse 45, “Who was it that touched me?” No one spoke up, not even the woman. Of course, Jesus knew who touched him. He’s not asking for his sake. He’s asking for the woman’s sake. He wanted to give her a chance to come forward and take responsibility. We saw God do the same thing in the Garden of Eden after the Fall. Adam and Eve were so ashamed of their sin and afraid of the consequences that they hid from God. God knew what they had done and where they were hiding, and yet, he called out, “Where are you?” God didn’t ask, because he didn’t know where they were. He asked in order to give them a chance to come forward and take responsibility.

And so, Jesus waited. He waited for the woman to come forward, but she didn’t come. After awhile, the situation became so awkward that Peter tried to explain it away: “Master, the crowds surround you and are pressing in on you!” But Jesus was unwilling to let this go, and he told Peter why in verse 46: “Someone touched me, for I perceive that power has gone out from me.”

Finally, the woman saw that there was nowhere for her to hide. Jesus knew what she did, and now she had to take responsibility. Luke tells us in verse 47 that “she came trembling, and falling down before him declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed."

The woman was afraid. She was afraid that Jesus would be angry with her, or that he would punish her, or that he would take away her healing. Her declaration that she had touched him and been healed wasn’t a declaration of praise. It was a declaration of confession. She was down at Jesus’ feet, begging for mercy.

But she didn’t have to beg for mercy, because Jesus wasn’t angry with her. Jesus was pleased with her! She feared condemnation, but instead, she would receive commendation. Listen to these profoundly merciful words in verse 48: “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.”

What amazing words Jesus had for a woman with so little faith! “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.” Don’t they sound familiar? They sound like words Jesus spoke over another woman in Chapter 7, a woman who had a city-wide reputation as a great sinner but had been forgiven of her sin by Jesus. *That* woman didn’t have a timid faith. She had an exuberant faith, a faith so strong that she went into a house full of the Pharisees who condemned her just so that she could show Jesus how much she loved him. When Jesus saw her faith, he declared, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” (Luke 7:50)

These are exactly the same words Jesus spoke to the woman with the bloody discharge. The ESV translates the words Jesus spoke to her in verse 48 as, “Your faith has made you well; go in peace”, but the Greek is exactly the same as the words Jesus spoke to the sinful woman: “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Why does this matter? It matters because it shows us that Jesus didn’t just heal the woman with the bloody discharge from her physical ailment. He healed her of her spiritual ailment. Her faith in Christ *saved* her from God’s justice against her sin, and brought her to a place of peace with God. It didn’t matter that her faith was weak, or that it wasn’t as bold and confident as the sinful woman’s faith. Luke is showing us through these two stories that Jesus gives the same thing to those with weak faith, and those with strong faith. He gives the gift of salvation.

How can a gift as great as salvation be offered to us so freely? It’s because we don’t need to earn it. Jesus earned it for us. Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty of our sin, and he rose from the dead to give us the gift of new life, so that he could offer salvation as a gift to anyone who comes to Jesus with faith. The faith can be strong, or the faith can be weak. It doesn’t matter. A little faith will do, even if it’s timid and unsure. As Jesus will say later in Luke 17:6,

“If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”

All we need is faith like a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds you could plant in those days, and we can come to Jesus and receive the gift of salvation.

That’s all the faith this woman had. Her faith was like a flickering flame that was on the verge of being snuffed out. She believed in the power of Jesus, but she doubted the goodness of Jesus towards sinners like herself. She knew that Jesus *could* help her, but she wondered whether Jesus *would* help her. She felt unwanted, undeserving, and unworthy.

But that didn’t stop Jesus from helping her. She may have been unworthy, but Jesus came to save the unworthy! He is the One who will not quench a “faintly burning wick”. Instead, he commended her for her little mustard seed of faith, and then he fanned that faith into a raging fire by healing her and saving her.

Whether you need to come to Jesus for the first time to be saved, or whether you need to come to Jesus for the thousandth time for help in a difficult trial, don’t wait until your faith is stronger. Don’t wait until you feel worthy. You don’t need to be worthy, because Jesus has made you worthy through his life, death, and resurrection. All you need is a little faith, not a lot, just a little. As the old hymn goes,

“Come, ye weary, heavy-laden

Lost and ruined by the fall

If you tarry ‘till you’re better

You will never come at all.”

(3) **FEARLESS FAITH**

While Jesus stopped to comfort the woman, word came from Jairus’ house in verse 49. It’s not good. “Your daughter us dead; do not trouble the Teacher anymore.” It seems like Jesus was too late. He may have helped one person, but that meant he couldn’t help another. But was that really the case? No. This story has a happy ending, but before we see that happy ending, Jesus has one more thing to teach us about faith. This leads us to our last point: fearless faith.

Jesus heard this tragic news of the girl’s death, and immediately he says in verse 50, “Do not fear; only believe, and she will be well.”

In the midst of our worst trials, a whole host of emotions come flooding into us. We feel anxiety. We feel pain. We feel despair. But behind it all is one thing: fear. Fear is what feeds the anxiety and pain and despair and makes the trial seem unbearable.

We can only imagine the fear that Jairus must have felt when he heard the news that his daughter had died. He was afraid that he would never see her smile again, or hear her voice, or feel the warmth of her embrace. He was afraid that, after twelve years of doing everything he could to take care of her, there was suddenly nothing he could do for her. He was afraid that the loss of his daughter would leave a gaping hole in his heart, and that life would never really be happy again.

But Jesus says, “Do not fear; only believe.” Believe in him. Believe that he is who he says he is, and believe that he can do what he says he can do, and you will no longer be afraid. People try all sorts of remedies for fear. They take medication, they see a counsellor, they try different meditation techniques. But faith is the only true remedy for fear. Only faith in Jesus can free us from our fears and lead us into peace.

That’s because faith is fearless. When you lose your job and you don’t know how you’re going to pay the bills, if your faith is in Jesus, you’re not afraid, because if God gave you his only Son, how will he not also provide everything else that you need? Or when you find out that you have terminal cancer and that you have months to live, if your faith is in Jesus, you’re not afraid, because though you die, you know that death is merely the doorway to true, joy-filled, everlasting life with God.

That’s the kind of faith that all of us should aspire to, a fearless faith that trusts so completely in the goodness and power of Jesus that nothing that could ever happen to us could ever cause us to fear.

But here’s the reality: fearless faith is hard. We hear Jesus’ words, “Do not fear; only believe, and she will be well”, and we say, “I believe, but help my unbelief!” We know that we shouldn’t fear, but we fear anyways. We know we should believe, but we doubt anyways.

That was the case for Jairus. Verse 51-52 say, “And when he came to the house, he allowed no one to enter with him, except Peter and John and James, and the father and mother of the child. And all were weeping and mourning for her, but he said, ‘Do not weep, for she is not dead but sleeping.’”

Jesus was inviting everyone there, including Jairus, to trust him. He was inviting them to believe that, because of Jesus, death no longer had the final word. Jesus did. And if Jesus said that death would have no hold on that little twelve year old girl, then it would be so! Death would flee from her, and she would live again. She would wake from death as if it were only a dream, and Jairus would have his precious girl once again.

But how did everyone respond? How did Jairus respond? Verse 53 says, “And they laughed at him, knowing that she was dead.”

Jesus had just invited them to believe, to put their faith in him as the Lord of life and death, and they laughed in his face. The scene was so tragic, and the death so recent, that they could only respond to Jesus’ claim with incredulous laughter.

That’s not what faith looks like. There is much room for laughter in the Christian life, but not when it comes to believing in God’s promises. When we laugh at the promises of God, we are spitting in God’s face, telling him that he cannot do what he has said he will do.

This is not Jairus’ finest moment. He came to Jesus with a desperate faith, but now he responds to Jesus with almost no faith at all.

But this doesn’t deter Jesus. After all, Jesus is the One who looks beyond our doubts and sees our faith, as small as it may be. And so, despite everyone’s lack of faith, Jesus decides to heal the girl anyways in verses 54-55: “But taking her by the hand he called, saying, ‘Child, arise.’ And her spirit returned, and she got up at once. And he directed that something should be given her to eat.”

Jesus doesn’t just help us when our faith is strong and fearless. He helps us when our faith is weak and fearful. That’s how merciful he is towards us. That’s how patient he is with us.

**CONCLUSION**

Today, if you feel unworthy to come to Jesus, or if you feel afraid of the trials around you, don’t let that stop you from coming to Jesus. Come to him through prayer, and come to him through his people.

I can’t think of a better way to lead into September as we get back into our regular weekly schedule. Outside of our Sunday meeting, we have two meetings that are crucial to the health and growth of our church.

The first is our prayer meetings. We all know how difficult it can be to pray consistently. We get tired, or we get distracted, and prayer always seems to be pushed out of our days. When we do in fact sit down to pray, we often struggle to know how to pray, or what to pray for. The main way that God has helped me with my own prayer life is through our prayer meetings. Our corporate prayer life has fed my private prayer life. If we are to come to Jesus through prayer, we need to regularly come together to pray. It’s when we pray together that we learn better how to pray, and we find the faith and discipline to keep on praying on our own.

The second is our TAGs. TAG stands for “Truth Application Group”, and it is where we take the truths of the gospel found in Scripture and apply them to our lives in a small group context.

What I love about our TAGs is that we’re not just trying to care for your head. We want to care for your heart. We’re not just trying to ensure that you know the truths of God’s Word. We’re trying to ensure that you believe, live, and feel the truths of God’s Word.

If you’ve never been a part of one of our TAGs, I strongly encourage you to join one. And if you are already part of a TAG, I encourage you to come into your TAG with an open and honest heart. Don’t be afraid to share your fears. Don’t be afraid to share your struggles. We don’t come to Jesus through his people just by attending a meeting. We come to Jesus when we open ourselves up to his people, so that the people of Christ can take the words of Christ and apply them to our hearts.

Whether your faith is strong or weak, Jesus calls us to come to him. Come to him through prayer, and come to him through his people. He will not quench a faintly burning wick. He will meet you, he will help you, and he will save you.