

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

1757 Conway Street • St. Paul, Minnesota 55106 • phone 651.774.1585 • e-mail church@stpascals.org

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Every single one of us is desperate. Not at any given moment of life, and not in any specific set of circumstances, but as the enduring, permanent condition of our existence. Some of us are quite well aware of it. Some of us are well able to see it in the people who surround us in their poverty, and pain, and despair, and tragedy. But it is the daily fact of all of us: We are desperate. The most pitiable among us don't recognize it.

If you go to a dictionary and look up that word, desperate, you will find that it can refer to three different things: It can be a feeling, or it can be an action, or it can be a situation. Right now I'm referring to the last one of those three. But in all cases, desperation describes the condition when all hope and all help seems lost, a moment in which people will behave in ways that they would never otherwise do, because there is no other option, and they know it.

I hate eating beets, but if the alternative is to starve to death I will do it. Desperation. I hate approaching people whom I don't know in order to ask for help, but if my car broke down in the middle of a desert highway and another person happened by, I would do that. Desperation. And I hate the thought of dying, and most of the time I can succeed in keeping that fact of life out of my consciousness, until I can't anymore...until I am desperate.

But that's the point here...I don't *become* desperate at that moment. I merely become *aware* of a desperation that has been my eternal state of existence since I was born, and in that respect, awakening to desperation is a gift, a blessing—or at least it *can* be. It reveals to me what has always been true about my life, namely, I will die someday, and when I do I won't be able to save myself, nor will anybody else on Earth be able to. Most of us can push off the need to confront our desperation for years or decades, and many of us do, but that is really just a game of self-delusion, denying what is simply true.

But those of us who wish to be wise and faithful to God would wish also to order our lives according to what is true, not just when we are forced to, but right now. And that is why today's Gospel of Mark can be so powerful for us, as it introduces us to two very different but equally desperate people, the synagogue official and the bleeding woman. Both of them are behaving in ways that only desperate people do, when it comes to confronting Jesus. The synagogue official would not ordinarily have paid Jesus any attention at all, and certainly not as a beggar for mercy. But his little daughter was dying. He was desperate. And the woman with the hemorrhages had spent the same 12 years of that girl's life being sapped of more and more of her own vitality. She was ritually impure and had no right or permission to touch Jesus' garment as she did, but she was desperate. The girl's father had previously put his faith in the youth and strength of his daughter's young age. The woman had previously put his faith in the physicians. They weren't necessarily wrong for doing that, unless that had become a reason to forget their ongoing desperation, to forget that nobody and no thing saves us from death. Not even Jesus.

The great scandal of the early Christian Church was the idea that a true Messiah could or needed to experience death. But even Jesus had to do that, not to surrender to it but to conquer it. To confront death is to stand before the single great temptation into desperation. But again, it's *not* that. To confront death is to actually stand before the ultimate *revelation* of the desperation in which we live every day...always have, always will. It's just what's true. Desperation is not the same as pathetic or hopeless. It's truly the opposite of that. It's the

realization that every *false* hope or promise is just that: False. Every attempt to evade our mortality is what is truly pathetic. Health *will* fail us. Death *will* come for us.

Nobody should seek death as its own reward or virtue but for believers, death is no longer the big scary thing that threatens to put an end to all hope. It is, as Jesus showed us, the gateway to glory, and the necessary birthing process into what is eternal.

To awaken to our desperation is not a shame. It is a freedom. It is a grace. In the gospel today, Jesus allowed that little girl to die, precisely to expose how powerless is death over any circumstance that confronts our God—even death itself. That kind of process was—and sometimes still is—so astonishing that people laugh at it, and ridicule it. So small is their hope. So amazing is our message!