

If It Sounds Too Good to Be True... Mark 5:21-43

Back in the early 2000s, Roy F. Baumeister and his team at Case Western Reserve University embarked on a groundbreaking study of a psychological concept they termed 'ego depletion.' This novel idea proposes that our psychological resources, though vast, are not infinite and are depleted with each use.

Okay, no huge light bulb there. Human beings have a vast wealth of resources, but those resources are not unlimited.

But the whole thing got interesting when Dr. Jean Twenge, recently married, [joined the team](#). Reflecting on her experience of the exhaustion of compiling a wedding registry, she wondered if the act of making decisions might draw from the same limited resources. "By the end, you could have talked me into anything," [Twenge told her new colleagues](#)."

They began to study the impact of ego depletion on decision-making. They initiated new experiments studying just what kind of resources we expend every time we make a

decision. What they discovered gave rise to another new and now widely used concept: "Decision fatigue."

[These experiments demonstrated](#) that there is a finite store of mental energy for exerting self-control. When people fended off the temptation to scarf down M&M's or freshly baked chocolate-chip cookies, they were then less able to resist other temptations. When they forced themselves to remain stoic during a tearjerker movie, afterward, they gave up more quickly on lab tasks requiring self-discipline, like working on a geometry puzzle or squeezing a hand-grip exerciser. Willpower turned out to be more than a folk concept or a metaphor. It really was a form of mental energy that could be exhausted.

One [study](#) proved the real-world impact of decision fatigue. The study looked at judges and parole decisions. What they found was that when making parole decisions immediately following food breaks, judges issued a favorable ruling +/- 65% of the time. That number gradually decreased throughout the day to just

around 0% immediately before the next food break. There were significant differences in favorable rulings—even among similar cases.

The research shows that every decision we make costs us something. Even small decisions like whether to have lasagna or hot dogs for supper or what to wear in the morning use up our resources.

Think about how exhausting it is to find something ... Anything ... on Netflix if you don't already know what you want to watch. You can spend an absolute soul-sucking amount of time hunting for something. Because, I mean, with 80 gajillion movies and shows, there's got to be ***something*** on!

So, it's no wonder we try to duck decision-making responsibilities whenever possible.

"Where do you want to go for supper?"

"I don't care. You decide. I chose last time."

Because we instinctively know these decisions cost us something, we try to avoid them. And while decision fatigue might mean nothing more than that you eat something you don't particularly care for or watch a horrible two-star straight-to-video flick like *The Open House* because, as the subtitle is quick to point out: "You Can't Lock Out What's Already Inside."

But while our dining and cinematic tastes can withstand the occasional bad decision brought on by decision fatigue, the same can't be said of our relationship with other human beings. If we've wasted all our resources on deciding whether or not it feels like an Arby's night, it's more difficult to work up the energy to embrace someone we don't particularly care for or who doesn't seem especially useful to us.

We can't escape it. We constantly make decisions about people. But what's telling is how we **prioritize** our responses to them.

Even Jesus can't get away from making decisions about people.

In our Gospel, Jesus has just calmed the storm and exorcised the demons from the Gerasene demoniac. He crosses back over the recently-calmed sea, where he's approached by an important man, a leader of the synagogue named Jairus. Up to this point in Mark, Jesus has been getting a bad reputation for hanging out with the wrong sort of folks. He's paying attention to all the wrong people, healing lepers, paralytics, and the demon-possessed.

Back in chapter two, he does some leadership recruitment—not at the finest business schools—but at a “tax booth,” where he calls Levi. Then, he adds insult to injury by going to Levi's house to eat with a bunch of “tax collectors and sinners.” People are starting to talk. You have to be a bit more discerning about the company you keep. Jesus is getting a bad reputation.

So, when Jairus prevails upon Jesus to come see about Jairus's sick little girl, everyone's relieved. Jairus is the kind of ally Jesus is supposed to cultivate. He's head of the Men's Morning

Breakfast down at the synagogue, president of the local Lion's club; he's got money, contacts. He can help Jesus network.

The disciples must have been thinking, "Finally. Now, we're getting somewhere." Do a favor for this guy, and there's no telling what kind of political capital Jesus can start building.

But on the way to Jairus's house, something happens. It shouldn't have been a big thing. Jesus probably should have just kept going. When you've got a big fish on the hook like Jairus, you don't want to lose your focus, don't want to get distracted by the little people pestering you for attention.

But Jesus stops anyway. Somebody's yanking on his shirttail. The disciples are watching for the tell-tale signs of decision fatigue. They're holding their breath because Jesus has a nasty habit of ignoring the useful folks and spending all his resources on people he'd do better to avoid.

"Who touched my clothes?" Jesus wants to know.

The disciples look at each other, their eyebrows knitted. “What do you mean, ‘Who touched my clothes?’ You’re in a crowd for crying out loud.”

A woman approaches. She owns up to grabbing onto his cloak.

Now, if Jesus is going to turn over a new social leaf and quit hanging out with the wrong crowd, this is the perfect time to start. Women in traditional cultures weren’t supposed to touch men who were not their husbands. Jesus could make a real statement about how he’s willing to play ball in the current political environment by telling this woman to take a hike.

Moreover, not only is she a woman, she’s an unclean woman. She has what the King James called an “issue of blood.” She’s been bleeding for 12 years, which is a nice way of saying she’s had female problems—not just monthly, but daily ... for 12 years.

A menstruating woman was considered unclean—which is to say, untouchable. She wasn’t supposed to touch anyone, let alone a strange man.

Jesus has an opportunity here. He could signal his willingness to play by the rules by doing the right thing, the thing that would grease the social gears, maximize utility, and make the largest number of people happy.

He could humiliate her, ***should*** humiliate her. But he doesn't.

He tells her that her faith has healed her.

"So what?" you ask.

The outrage is that he gives tacit approval to the woman's actions. She's a drain on society. You can't encourage that kind of behavior. We know how people are; they'll take advantage of you every time if they think they can get something for free—especially healthcare.

Indeed, if she's in bad shape, the thinking went: God is punishing her for some sin.

But rather than do the socially and politically expedient thing, Jesus walks the margins again in search of those hiding in the shadows.

Soon, he and Jairus make it to where the sick little girl is. But by the time they get there, she's already died.

Oh well, nice try, Jesus. Thanks for coming. We have some lovely parting gifts for you. We appreciate you taking the time, but all that's left to us now is to start preparing her body for burial.

Jesus says, "I'd like to see her anyway. She's only sleeping."

Mark says that everybody laughs at Jesus for saying this. They've seen dead people before. They know what dead people look like. So, Jesus isn't sharing a light moment with the gathered crowd.

The word Mark uses is literally "laughing against" or "laughing at." In other words, the crowd outside Jairus's house knows what's possible when it comes to corpses and late-arriving miracle workers. To put a finer point on it, everyone **there** that day had a handle on what was possible.

But they didn't count on Jesus showing up. They didn't factor in what was possible with God.

Jesus persists, though. As far as Jairus is concerned, Jesus has done all that could be asked of him. Now that she's dead, Jesus will only make himself unclean by going to see her to hold her lifeless hand.

He never learns, this Jesus. What's the public relations upside here? You've got to think about how this stuff will play on cable news.

Not Jesus. Ignoring the cost/benefit analysis, taking no notice of the pressure from the jeering crowd, and making a choice to embrace another human being whom nobody thought worth the effort ... even with decision fatigue threatening ... Jesus goes to her, takes the little girl's hand, and tells her to get up ... and together they walk out from the shadows hand in hand.

What I find interesting about these two intertwined stories is the issue of how short-sighted they make Jesus appear on the front

end. In both cases, Jesus participates in activity guaranteed to marginalize him in everyone's eyes. In both cases, he risks the social and political costs of being unclean by touching those who are unclean. A true test of your convictions is what you're prepared to look like a complete idiot for—what you're willing to lose everything for.

The great shock of the story, however, is that once Jesus touches these people, they're healed, made alive—and not only is Jesus not unclean as a result of this encounter, neither any longer are **they**.

In touching these two in an unclean state, Jesus has not only healed them physically, he's restored them to the social world in which purity is boss. In other words, he's given them back their status as members of good standing in the community. He's touched them, taken them out of the shadows, and given them back their lives ... in more ways than one.

In both cases, Jesus bucks conventional wisdom about what's possible ... and what's definitely **outside** the realm of possibility.

In the face of a scoffing world, Jesus demonstrates his faith in God's willingness to snatch life from the jaws of death by acting faithfully. Jesus sees the woman and the young girl through the eyes of God and God's idea of who's valuable and who's worth taking a chance on. In the woman who's been dead in so many crucial ways for twelve years and in the twelve-year-old girl who's also now dead, God sees the possibilities no one else can see.

Not long ago, Jennifer checked on Australia, the houseless man who's made a home with us on our front steps. You may have seen him. He's always very nice, but he often seems to see the world through a different pair of glasses than everybody else.

Seeing that his blanket was in bad shape and he was sleeping on a pile of plastic bags, she asked him if he'd like a new blanket and some pads to sleep on.

He said, "Thank you, but that's too much. I have what I need."

Maybe not what a jeering crowd might consider much, but God sees a human being inside Australia. And because of God,

Jennifer sees him, too. The life of Douglass Blvd. Christian Church has helped form us all and given us different eyes to see the world.

But I find it interesting that without what hardly anyone would call the makings of “a life,” Australia has decided that he has ***enough***. In his eyes, he has all he needs.

And in God’s eyes, Australia is enough. Despite what the scoffers or anyone else think of his future prospects, the way God sees the world, Australia is enough.

Does that mean one day we’ll turn on CNN to find that Australia has just won the Nobel Peace Prize or discovered the cure for cancer?

Does it even mean that Australia will one day get a job, a family, and a mortgage—or just that he’ll get the kind of help he needs to manage his life better?

Not necessarily.

But so what?

He's already worthy of love, dignity, and human compassion. In God's eyes, Australia's **already** enough.

Here at Douglass, we're still trying to figure out what it means to be a church in the Highlands in a post-COVID world. Are we so sure about what we think is possible that we become part of the crowd, laughing off the idea of what God might actually have in store?

It might sound too good to be true, but if Jesus is hanging out close by, you never know what death people might get up and walk away from.

—Amen.