

How Well Does the Lord Work?

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Mark 6:53-56

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I don't normally use props in my sermons but I want to show you something, we're going to have a little show and tell this morning. Does anyone know what this is? Does anyone know? Well, it is one of those new-fangled batteries, and this battery goes to my remote control. These batteries, like all batteries wear out after about two months. They just come in a different shape than your standard double A or triple A, or nine volt batteries.

Well, no matter what kind of battery you have in your remote, you know what I find, what I find as I'm sure you do too is that as soon as you put the battery in your remote, when it is fresh, you barely have to touch the buttons and the remote does its magic. It raises the volume, turns the television on and off, and it changes the channel, you barely have to touch it. But then after about a month or two, what happens? You have to push down a little harder to get the television to do what you want, don't you? And then a little harder, and then really hard, and finally when the batteries are really weak, you may even have to shake the remote a bit. Sometimes I even find myself taking the battery out and putting it back in a different position so that I can get all the remaining bits of juice out of it before I break down and buy a new one. Now, you may say to me "Why do you put yourself through all that? Why don't you just go out and buy a new battery when the old one gets so weak?" Well, I guess it's my Scottish ancestry that taught me how to pinch a penny and I just don't want to buy a new battery until every last ounce of power is out of that first battery.

Well, I thought about my experience with remote control batteries as I was preparing for my sermon this morning, because it seems that if there is anything that Mark, the author of this

gospel wants us to know, it is that the Lord's batteries are fully charged. For why else would he tell us that whenever the sick were brought to the marketplaces they begged Jesus to let them touch the fringe of his cloak and all who touched it were healed? Now, why would people only want to touch the fringe of his cloak, well, I don't know, Mark doesn't say. But I don't think it's because they didn't want to touch Jesus. In fact, I guess it is because they didn't want to get Jesus sick and so it was their way of assuring Jesus they wouldn't make too much contact with him. And I also imagine that in those days crowds were gathered around Jesus everywhere he went, and if you were sick or frail, and if you were so sick you had to be brought to the marketplace by someone else, you didn't have the ability to push and shove your way through crowds of people who were gathered around Jesus and so the best you could hope for is that you would touch the fringe of his cloak as he was passing by. And this gospel writer tells us that was enough for them to be healed. In other words, to receive healing power from Jesus, you didn't have to touch his actual flesh, like his hand or his bare chest, and you didn't even have to touch him through an article of clothing that was firmly pressed up against him. All you had to do in fact was to barely touch him, to touch something only a part of which was touching him. The fringe of your garment isn't pressed up against you, it is just kind of blowing in the wind, but even if you touched that, you could be healed. Now when I read that, I think to myself, that's kind of like having a brand new battery in your remote when you barely touch it, and bam, something happens. The gospel writer Mark seems to want us to know that the Lord is that powerful that his power is that remarkable.

Well, I know that may all be interesting, but what does it matter to us how well Jesus could heal those who saw him back in the first century? What does it matter? We after all do not find

the Lord walking the earth and dressed in a cloak. But I think that many times and in many ways, we too may find ourselves on the fringes of faith. When we say that something is on the fringes we mean of course that it is on the outside, it is not part of the center. To get fringe benefits is to get benefits that are not a central part of your salary or your compensation, and to say that someone is on the fringes politically is to say that they have opinions that are not part of the mainstream. And at times, I think we may worry and be anxious about being on the fringes of faith. I imagine maybe there have been times in your life and there have even been times in mine, where you have said, "You know, I just don't look like the kind of person who is that close to God. What if I haven't spent my entire life going to church and joining the choir and this committee and that committee? What if I don't carry a bible everywhere I go and wear a cross around my neck? What if I don't go around saying phrases like 'Praise the Lord' and 'Hallelujah' to what everyone else says. Isn't that what true Christians do? Isn't that what real Christians do? What if I don't really know my bible too well? Some people may not even know their bibles well enough to know what is in Mark Chapter 25. How many of you know what's in Mark 25, by the way? There is no Mark 25. And as you think about all these things you may ask "Can the Lord heal me, even if I am on the fringes? Even if I am on the fringes of faith, can he heal me?" And you may ask that when you are physically sick just as those people were who sought to touch the Lord's cloak when he walked the earth. But you may also ask that when you feel sick emotionally, or psychologically, or even spiritually.

And as you ask this question, there are of course some people out there who will answer with a resounding no. If you want to experience God's blessings of health and good fortune and so forth, you better act like it. In fact, if you are suffering or you are sick in any way, it must be

because you have sinned in some way, or you are not good enough. But I hope you are not taken in by those who say such things, and I hope that for two reasons. First of all, a lot of people may think they are in those crowds that are on the center of the Christian faith and you are on the outside, but only God knows who is who, and one thing we learn from the gospels is that often people who are on the real fringe are sure they are in the center, and those who are in the true center are sure they are on the fringe. And second, if you think you have to be crowded around the Lord to be healed, when you think about things that way, it seems to make God awfully weak, doesn't it? It seems to make God awfully weak, like one of those overused batteries that you have to push down as hard as you can on, because the charge in it is just about gone.

Is God that small to you? Is God that weak to you? Is the power of God to work wonders in your life dependent on what you have already done or how good a person you are? Is that, in fact, what Jesus said? Didn't he in fact, say something different? Didn't he say that God makes the sun rise on the evil and the good and makes the rain fall on the righteous and the unrighteous?

When I was in my first parish in North Carolina, I recall there was a family of five who joined our church from a church in another denomination. Now, I don't want to say what the name of this denomination is because I don't want to offend anybody, but I think it is one that most of us in the PC(USA) would find to be spiritually abusive. In their experience of going to church, in fact, this family had heard quite a lot about going to hell, but they had never heard that God loves them. It was pretty clear if anything ever was, that this was a family who considered themselves unworthy to be called good people or even God's people. They

considered themselves on the fringes if anybody did. But I remember one day I talked to them about joining our church and having their children baptized. Well, they weren't sure about that. As a family who was new to the whole idea that God loved them they weren't so sure that they believed that they were worthy enough for these things. But I persuaded them as best I could that God loved them regardless of how worthy they thought they were, and they finally said, ok, they would do it. So the Sunday came where I was to baptize their three children and the mom and dad joined the church, and as they joined the church I remember I asked the couple "Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and will you live your lives in this church as his worthy disciples?" Now I have asked this question so many times, I have to admit that half the time I'm not even thinking about the question. And the standard answer to that question is "I will" but I remember as the mother joined the church, she had tears streaming down her face, and she said, "I'll try, I'll try" and I always say that was the best "I will" I've ever heard.

In your mind's eye you may see many people crowded around our Lord. Many people whom you believe belong there around the center, while you are convinced that you belong out on the fringes. But even if that is true, know that our Lord is big enough, and mighty enough and strong enough to heal even those who just touch the fringe of his cloak.