



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 6 – Proper 8 Year B

A Beloved Child of God

[RCL]: 2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

Jesus sees beyond the outward appearance to the heart, revealing, as he does so, the very heart of God. A crowd presses in on Jesus, clamoring to see the miracle worker some were claiming to be the Messiah. As he makes his way to Jairus' home, he is interrupted by an encounter with a woman who would have seemed destined to die unknown, unremembered, unremarked. But this woman showed her great faith in trusting that all she needed to do was reach out and touch the hem of Jesus' garment. Nothing more was required, but nothing less would do.

Clearly, she had heard of Jesus' reputation as a healer. As we learn from Mark's Gospel, for twelve years, "She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse."

A faithful Jewish response would have been to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem, seeking healing by offering sacrifices. But just as with the lepers Jesus made whole, this woman would have been declared unclean. Because of her hemorrhaging, she was no longer fit to be in the Temple—not even in the Court of the Women.

Knowing the state of medicine in the first century, we know she would have eaten every conceivable combination of herbs, applying endless creams and ointments, doing anything someone asked and paying everything she had. A woman of some means now reduced to poverty. But there would have been the other, harsher, side of her malady. Jesus often contends against the perception in the culture of his day that if someone was suffering, this was God's punishment for sin. The ongoing hemorrhage would have left her increasingly cut off from community.

We know this because we still have diseases that come with a stigma. Fighting cancer is seen as heroic, but less so mental illness, chronic pain, or addiction. As soon as anyone found out that she had been bleeding for five years, seven years, ten years—whatever it was by that point—judgment would follow. The sickness came to define her for everyone who knew how she suffered—that is, everyone except for Jesus. Beyond this, we also know that her standing in society would have been in relation to a man. Just as Jairus goes to Jesus on behalf of his daughter, the way of that part of the world in the first century would require the woman to be in the company of a brother, uncle, or son. Instead, she is presented as without family.

Through her faith that she just needed to touch the hem of his garment, we see how much she invested in this one last hope of healing. Some people spoke of Jesus' teaching with great authority. Others speculated he was Elijah or one of the other prophets returned. Many hoped Jesus would overthrow the Romans so that Jews could once more rule Israel on their own. But for the real sufferers, cut off from others because of disease, there would have been only one tidbit about Jesus that mattered. His reputation was clear. Wherever Jesus went, he cast demons out of the possessed. Jesus touched people who were blind, deaf, and lame, making them see, hear, and walk.

The most difficult part of her disease was that her bleeding did not just make her ritually unclean, and so unable to worship in the Temple; the religious law of her time mandated that anyone she touched would also become unclean. To have Jesus touch her might bring her healing, but it would have made him ritually unclean as well. She would have to push against a lot of pressure from her society just to reach Jesus.

He would have been difficult to find in those days anyway, as he was always crossing back and forth around the Sea of Galilee and then traveling down to Jerusalem for the festivals. Then she found him that day on the seashore. She gathered with a large crowd of others, all bent on hearing Jesus, many wanting healing as well. An important religious leader named Jairus came to implore Jesus to heal his daughter.

As Jesus started toward Jairus' house, the woman knelt down, reaching out for the barest edge of his robe and grabbing hold as if touching the very throne of God, as life and healing from the one God flowed through it. And her plan worked. The bleeding stopped. Her body was finally healed after twelve years of suffering.

Then everything the woman planned went wrong. Jesus stopped. He stopped everyone. The whole crowd. Jesus cried out wanting to know who touched him. His disciples couldn't believe the question; with such a great crowd rushing around, a lot of people had been bumping into Jesus. Jesus kept looking because he too felt the miracle.

There is so much power in this moment as the woman everyone came to ignore became the center of attention. Mark's Gospel tells us in fear and trembling she fell down before Jesus. How could she not be terrified? In so many ways, everyone told her she was unworthy, cursed by God. And now this—once more, she would be humiliated. She throws herself at Jesus' feet and recounts her whole story. Twelve years of suffering. Trembling, she tells Jesus the whole truth down to the hem of his garment.

After so many people had cast her down, Jesus lifts her up, looks into her eyes and says the words which make her healing complete. With the eyes of love on her, he said, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

"Daughter." Not an outcast. Not a woman alone in a society that treated you in connection to the men in your life. She was a beloved child of God. In Jesus naming as daughter the woman afflicted with suffering for twelve years, we see the very heart of God. Others may have judged her harshly, but God never forgot her, always loved her, and wanted to welcome her home.

"Your faith has made you well." Jesus knew what great faith she had come to have that even the very hem of his robe could heal. His disciples were often clueless. The crowds were fickle. But this woman's faith knew no bounds.

“Go in peace,” he said. *Shalom* means so much more than a lack of war. This peace is health, well-being, and wholeness. Her body healed, but Jesus was so much more interested in healing her mind and soul—he was interested in complete healing and setting her free from the prison of suffering.

Sickness had defined her. Then Jesus set her free to be a daughter of God. She didn’t continue to follow Jesus that day, at least not physically. She could cut away from the crowd, confident that Jairus’ daughter would be healed, as she began the journey to Jerusalem. Her duty would be to offer sacrifices for thanksgiving for healing. Beyond this would be the simple fact that she would be allowed once more into God’s Temple. Jesus does this so often with his healing. He doesn’t just cure disease but restores people to their community. She wanted, needed, the bleeding to stop, but what she needed more—and Jesus knew it—was to be accepted once again. To have God look into her eyes and call her “daughter.”

So often, people, beloved children of God, are judged by society and found wanting. They are named in various ways as outcasts and treated as less than human. And until all of God’s children, the whole human family, are welcome at the table, we will be falling short of the kingdom of God. For those of us with a seat at the table, we can pray for the grace to see the world as God sees it and the courage to act.

But if you are one whom others have seen as unworthy and judged as lacking, know that God loves you as you are and wants better for you as well. You don’t have to even touch the hem of his garment. You only have to reach out your heart in prayer and offer God your pain and suffering. God wants to take that hurt and give you *shalom*—the health, healing, and wholeness—he gave to a woman not named in scripture, but whose faith is unforgettable.

This is something we can all experience every time we gather for the Eucharist. In this Great Thanksgiving, Jesus is the host. At this table, all of us are known and loved. In the meal of bread and wine, we are fed. And in this meal, we find ourselves beloved children of God. Then we are empowered to share that same love with others.

Amen.

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