

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church**  
**Third Sunday in Lent**  
**Sunday, March 3, 2024**  
**10 AM**

Text: Mark 5:21-43

Theme: The Shadow of Isolation

[prayer]

There is a book of poetry called *The Gospel of the Bleeding Woman*. And in it is a poem called “Passover,” about the bleeding woman from today’s Scripture lesson. She laments,

If I lived in Egypt when death  
floated past, I wouldn’t slaughter  
the lamb, smear blood  
over the door. One bleeding  
body per house  
must be enough for God.<sup>1</sup>

*One bleeding body per house must be enough for God.* In one sentence the poem’s author, Katie Manning, captures the bleeding woman’s bitterness. Manning uses her book of poetry to give the bleeding woman a name and history – two things, coincidentally, the Gospel writer denies her. Mark names all the men in this story – Jesus, Jairus, Peter, James, and John – but the two female protagonists are nameless. Instead, they are defined by their bodies – the sex of those bodies, and the things that ail them.

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<sup>1</sup> Manning, Katie. *The Gospel of the Bleeding Woman: Poems* (Point Loma Press) (p. 6). Wipf & Stock, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition.

It is so easy to reduce people to just their bodies. My time as a hospital chaplain taught me that. “Where does it hurt?” was a standard question asked of patients. But only the really good doctors and nurses understood that the answer to that question involves more than physical symptoms. Our modern medical system likes to believe that the physical and the spiritual are separate things, but our faith tradition teaches us otherwise. The spiritual is not easily separated from the physical. “The body keeps the score” - which is to say, the body is the repository of our lived experiences and stories. Remember that even in his resurrected body, Jesus still bears the scars of his crucifixion.

For twelve years our unnamed woman has been reduced to her bleeding body. We’re not told why she has been bleeding for so long, but we don’t need to know the reason to imagine the hurt she is carrying: The constant discomfort. The shame at being unable to keep herself clean. And the despair at feeling abandoned – by her community and by God.

Twelve years is a long time to wait for a miracle. In the meantime, she has bankrupted herself searching for a cure. The local healers are more than willing to take her money, even if they bring her no relief. And her community has shunned her. The religious law is clear – a menstruating woman is unclean. No one will risk touching her for fear of becoming unclean themselves.

And so, for twelve years this woman has been kept from breaking bread with her community, worshiping in the synagogue, and entering the temple. Perhaps she has been denied marriage and a family. Perhaps her condition even keeps her confined to her home.

I remember when the pandemic began and we were all confined to *our* homes. Suddenly we became a little more aware of the experiences of people who are homebound due to age or chronic illness or disability. We learned that isolation only compounds physical suffering.

A cure for our unnamed woman means more than an end to the incessant drip of blood between her legs. It means an end to her shame, isolation, and loneliness. It means regaining a sense of belonging. It means, in a word, freedom.

And so, when Jesus comes to town, she seizes on a desperate bid for healing. She's heard that Jesus walks with God. When he lays his hands on people, miracles happen. But she is unclean and Jesus is a holy man; she can't believe he would risk touching her. But maybe she can touch *him* – just a small touch, without him noticing.

The crowd around Jesus is thick – people pushing, shoving, reaching, trying to get his attention. And in the middle of that crowd is a synagogue leader, Jairus. He looks distraught and is urging Jesus toward his home. “My daughter is dying! Save her, please!”

Jairus' presence makes the woman nervous. He is a prominent leader in the community. There might be consequences if he catches her mingling with the crowd. But this is her chance. She drops to her hands and knees and starts crawling. Brushing up against the people around her means she risks making them unclean. But nothing matters more than getting to Jesus. So, she keeps crawling until she can see the hem of his cloak. It's just there, a few inches away...With everything within her, every ounce of faith she has left, she reaches out and feels the tips of her fingers brush the fringe of his garment.

[pause]

The Scriptures tell us that when the woman touched Jesus, “Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease” (v. 29). The immediacy of the healing is remarkable. But what is more remarkable is what this woman risks to touch Jesus. She risks his disgust and anger. She risks being caught violating the law. She risks further shame and condemnation.

Church, I know Jesus is supposed to be the hero of this story, but let’s give this woman the credit she deserves: She is *brave*. If you had been told for twelve years that your hurt was not worth the world’s attention, you might start to believe it. But this woman is not buying it. By touching Jesus, she disrupts the narrative that has been controlling her life – a narrative that says her bleeding body is something to be ashamed of. By touching Jesus, she disrupts a system of power that says her suffering is not worthy of its attention. By touching Jesus, she disrupts the oppressive forces that have kept her isolated these twelve long years. No longer will her pain keep her separate and ‘other;’ she’s demanding that her pain be acknowledged.

And Jesus does just that! He responds to her audacious touch the way we should always respond to suffering: with compassion. He doesn’t kick her while she’s down, he doesn’t heap shame upon her shame, and he doesn’t question her motives. In fact, he seems downright pleased that she broke the rules. “Daughter, your faith has made you well,” he says. “Go in peace, and be healed of your disease” (v. 34).

Jesus' compassion is just as audacious and disruptive as the woman's bravery. Recall that he is in the middle of responding to another crisis when he feels the woman touch him. A little girl is dying, and her desperate father, Jairus, has come begging Jesus for help. Jairus is a powerful, well-respected, and probably wealthy member of the community. He is not a person who would have been accustomed to begging. And yet he literally throws himself at Jesus' feet.

Given Jairus' powerful position, social convention dictates that Jesus honor Jairus' need over the woman's. After all, he's a synagogue leader while she's a social outcast. But Jesus does the exact opposite – he stops what he's doing and gives the woman his attention. Jairus' need may be urgent, but there is something compelling in the woman's touch. The Scriptures tell us it's her faith. This faith is more than a timid hope she might be healed. It is a powerful belief that drives the woman to action. And Jesus rewards that faith by humanizing the woman. He not only heals her, but he gives her a new identity. No longer is she the unnamed, bleeding woman. Instead, Jesus calls her 'Daughter.' He elevates her from social outcast to child of God right there in front of her entire community.

[pause]

Friends, we possess the same power to humanize the outcast members of our own communities. “Where does it hurt?” is not just about diagnosing someone’s pain. “Where does it hurt?” is the gateway to compassion. When we ask someone where it hurts and humbly listen to their answer, we briefly enter into their pain and bear it with them. What a gift Jesus gave the bleeding woman by acknowledging her suffering! And what a gift we give others when we do the same.

Still, we are most inclined to acknowledge the pain of the people who are most like us. And it is the pain of the rich and powerful – the Jairus’ of the world – that get the most attention, while the poor and marginalized suffer under ongoing systems of injustice and oppression.

As followers of Jesus, we have a special responsibility to care for the suffering of people our society isolates and pushes to the margins. We have a responsibility to disrupt the narrative that their pain is not worthy of our attention. Asking an abused woman “Where does it hurt?” disrupts the cycle of violence by legitimizing her story. Asking your unsheltered neighbor “Where does it hurt?” disrupts the stigma of homelessness by legitimizing his story. Asking our siblings of color “Where does it hurt?” disrupts the power of racism by legitimizing their stories. The same can be said of poverty, mental illness, addiction.

“Where does it hurt?” is a *liberating* question. It has the power to begin unraveling unjust systems of privilege and power, one person’s story at a time. Sometimes we feel helpless in the face of all the suffering in our world. And sometimes we fear the answer to that question “Where does it hurt?” Often what we fear is not having a solution for someone’s suffering. We fear the discomfort that comes with encountering other people’s pain, particularly if it is pain we do not understand. We may be afraid that if we ask about their hurt, they will demand something of us that we are not prepared to give – maybe our time, or money, or even a change in long cherished beliefs. We may even discover that all along, we have been part of the system that is causing them pain.

But never underestimate the power of compassion. At the end of our Scripture lesson, Jairus receives word that his daughter has died. Presumably she died while Jesus was showing the bleeding woman compassion. Some might argue Jesus’ decision to stop for a while cost the little girl her life. It is true that as human beings, our compassion is finite. There are only so many people and causes we can care about before we exhaust ourselves and end up doing more harm than good. We must always discern first whether we have the capacity to give our full attention to someone else’s pain before we ask where it hurts.

But God’s compassion is infinite and inexhaustible. Jesus takes the time to heal the bleeding woman, and then he carries on to Jairus’ home and raises his daughter from the dead. In the end, Jesus disrupts the power of death itself. And we get to participate in that ultimate act of disruption by practicing the same kind of radical compassion that Jesus demonstrates. When we acknowledge the hurt in another person and legitimize their pain, we make a way for the healing power of resurrection. And resurrection is always the end of the story.

Amen.