

Sermon for Trinity Church

Proper 8, 2024

A woman who had suffered a condition of hemorrhaging for twelve years—a long succession of physicians had treated her, and treated her badly, taking all her money and leaving her worse off than before— had heard about Jesus. She slipped in from behind and touched his robe. She was thinking to herself, “If I can put a finger on his robe, I can get well.” The moment she did it, the flow of blood dried up. She could feel the change and knew her plague was over and done with.

The Gospel of Mark tells stories, many stories, sometimes even stories inside of stories, like this morning’s Gospel. The Gospel begins first with the story of a young girl who her father fears is ill unto death. Her father, a Jewish official, seeks out Jesus the itinerant healer to save his daughter’s life. A great, good story. But then in the midst of that story, we get the story of the woman suffering twelve years of hemorrhage, a woman who longs terribly to be healed. In the Gospel she takes a great risk, slips up behind Jesus and touches him. In a moment, she’s healed.

As you well know, nothing is ever simple when it comes to human suffering and healing. There are two stories of suffering this morning, with women at the center of both, two stories which plumb the depths of seemingly inexplicable anguish.

Let me offer a simplified picture of human suffering as understood in the New Testament. Some forms of suffering are by their nature, paradoxically filled with meaning and reward. We may not grasp that in our initial response to suffering. But we can quickly recollect examples where suffering rewards those who suffer. Having a baby often includes suffering and yet how incredible the reward. Putting everything you have on the line to realize a dream, whether going to school or starting a business or something else, can lead to a lifetime of reward when it’s over. And while much of the meaning remains a mystery to us, we have come to understand that the terrible suffering of Jesus, freely offered by Jesus, brings humanity a reward. All those kinds of suffering and more have an end, a goal, in sight. However reluctantly, that suffering can make sense to us. But sometimes, as with the woman who suffered twelve years of hemorrhage, the suffering just goes on and on with no end in sight.

The unnamed woman’s suffering is further aggravated by social prejudice and selfish malfeasance, by people who mean to get a financial advantage for themselves through the woman’s suffering. I’m sure everyone here is aware of the ancient prejudice against bodily hemorrhages. Some years ago, there was a popular novel called, “The Red Tent.” The book was trendy in my parish, so popular that two different people gave me gift copies of the book. Women were confined once a month to the Red Tent to conclude their cycle and from that confinement, the story grew. What the Red Tent signified was simple—you cannot touch the tent unless you shared the cycle or were in childbirth. If you were a woman, you were forbidden to be touched or to touch during that confinement.

Now, take that taboo and stretch it to twelve long years! Twelve terrible years, with no end in sight, confined to your own person with no one to touch or be touched. I find that horrifying, but the story gets worse. The Gospel reports that medical quacks have taken advantage of the sick woman and have, over time, stripped her of her money and her hope. The pretenders made her worse off than before. So, the woman’s suffering is not confined just to social prejudice but also includes the pain inflicted by hucksters. It seems there’s no end in sight.

That is until the woman hears of the healing powers of Jesus. But how can she avail herself of them? By law, she cannot be touched, nor may she touch others. Certainly not a

rabbi. What can she do? In a desperate move to circumvent prejudice and legalism, the woman comes up with an inspired alternative—she believes that if she even touches the fringe of the coat of Jesus, she will be healed.

Growing up, the largest crowds I ever encountered were at the State Fair. Nearly two million or more people attended our fair and as you might imagine, you found yourself jammed into a crowd, uncertain of your surroundings and even who was near you. The world was a blur of people. Now in this morning's Gospel, Jesus is packed into a crowd like the state fair, people leaning into him at every side. And yet despite the people pressing in on him, Jesus identifies that someone has touched him seeking healing. The woman who suffered twelve years of hemorrhage has been healed.

I love this story—the wonder, the mystery, even the inexplicable nature of the healing. Who needs explanations when joy is the only right response!? In this Gospel story, we get a broader picture of what it means to be healed by Christ, something greater than the act of physical healing. Yes, that physical healing was so extraordinary, it could only be thought a miracle. But there's more than physical healing. The woman is set free of her confinement and granted a healing that can only be called liberation. The woman recovered, becomes a sign not only of the power of God but of the grace that can both restore and liberate.

The two stories leave enough questions that they remain open-ended for us. So be it. But I believe this, that the healing of God goes far beyond the measure of physical healing but that it includes much more. When we are healed, we are restored to family, to community, and to creation. Stories of healing are not just reports of miracles, they are occasions of celebration—God's hope, compassion and love has won our hearts and bodies. Amen.