

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8B) June 28, 2009
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15; 2:23-24 2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Psalms 30 Mark 5:21-43

Joy comes in the morning

You brought me up, O LORD, from the dead; you restored my life as I was going down to the grave... Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning. (Psalm 30:3,6)

Healing is what we are up to today. Today we head for renewal, for fullness of life. To add to that trajectory toward abundance, we have not just one Gospel story to ponder this morning, but two. In this long section from the end of chapter 5, Mark has inserted one healing story right in the middle of another. The story of Jesus healing a woman with a hemorrhage is tucked inside the story of Jesus raising the daughter of Jairus from the dead.

Before we get into the stories, let's set the scene. Jesus is beside the shore again, and with another large crowd. He has crossed the Sea of Galilee at least four times now -- last week we heard about one of those crossings, when a sudden storm came up and nearly swamped the boat. Mark's Gospel seems eager to underscore these crossings back and forth across the sea, for it presents Jesus ministering now on the Jewish shore and now on the Gentile shore, with equal power to heal. As the commentaries tell us, by arranging the material this way, Mark is showing that Jesus' ministry extends to both Jews and Gentiles, that he "blesses without partiality Jew and Gentile, near and far, clean and unclean."¹

In today's text Jesus is back on Jewish territory surrounded by another great crowd, when a man named Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, falls at Jesus' feet and begs him repeatedly to heal his daughter, who is at the point of death. Jesus agrees, and sets out with him, but on the way Jesus is interrupted by a woman in the crowd who is also on a desperate search for healing.

I want to stop right here, just as Jesus stopped, and to point out that the two main characters in the story (aside from Jesus) are practically archetypal opposites in status, wealth, and power. Jairus is an important man. He's got a

¹ Fred B. Craddock et al., *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year B*, Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, p.328.

name in this story, and a position in his community; he is a leader of the synagogue and the head of his family. By contrast, the woman in the crowd is given no name, and she is apparently penniless, weak, and alone. She is on the margins of society because of her gender and because of her illness: the flow of blood from which she has suffered for twelve long years has made her ritually unclean. And her impurity is contagious. Anyone who touches her, anyone who lies down a bed on which she has slept, or anyone who sits upon a chair that she has used, will also be made unclean.²

So you have a man of social privilege and a woman at the margins, and yet both of them are in need. Both of them turn to Jesus for saving help. Contact with Jesus is what they know will save. “Lay your hands” on my daughter, Jairus asks Jesus, “so that she may be made well and live” (Mk 5:23) -- and the Greek words can mean, “so that she may be saved and attain eternal life.” Similarly, the woman with the hemorrhage wants only to touch Jesus -- and it doesn’t even have to be Jesus himself that she touches, it can be just the hem of his cloak. That touch is what will save her -- she is convinced of it.

So despite the stark differences between these two characters, in essence their longing is the same: to make contact with Jesus, whose presence, touch, and words bring healing, whose eyes and voice and hands convey the power of God. What do *you* need that would lead *you* to Jesus? What desire would propel you, as Jairus was propelled, to throw yourself at Jesus’ feet to intercede for someone you love or for a cause you hold dear? What fierce longing for wholeness or fullness of life would send you to Jesus with the audacity of that nameless woman who refused to quit, refused give up, even after twelve years of fruitless effort?

Both Jairus and the nameless woman show that healing begins with desire, with a longing articulated in words or in the wordless reach of a hand that stretches out to touch the divine Source of healing. Prayer begins with desire. Worship begins with desire. Healing begins with desire. And our longing must be persistent, bold, brave, unflappable, unstoppable. Jairus ignores the people who tell him it’s too late, his daughter is dead; the woman with the flow of blood ignores the jostling crowd, the social taboos that exclude her, and the apparent hopelessness of her case. The two of them persistently dare to ask, dare to trust, dare to hope -- it’s the same kind of stubborn, steadfast, humble, and, I dare say, holy desire that fills people who keep working for peace in the Middle East,

² Mary Ann Tolbert, “Mark,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, p. 267.

against all odds, or working for a stable climate and a habitable world, or working to create conversations around the dinner table in which every person is listened to with kindness and respect.

And as long as we are talking about archetypes, why not allow this nameless woman to stand -- for a moment -- for all women? Maybe she can be every woman who has “issues” with menstruation or pregnancy, difficulties with sexuality, reproduction, menopause or aging. For us women in the room, perhaps we can allow this unnamed woman to be named with our own name for a while, to carry within herself our very particular longing as women for healing and for fullness of life. She is heading for Jesus, and she intends and seeks and hopes to be made well.

And lest you men start to think that this story is only for women, let’s remember the Jewish belief that blood is life. As one writer points out, “Blood [is] such a sacred, precious, and dangerous force in Jewish belief and practice because it [is] what God said constitutes the very life of a being.”³ A woman who has been bleeding for twelve years has in the Jewish sense been losing her very life for twelve years. Life has been seeping out of her, slowly draining away. And isn’t that true for all of us -- men and women alike? Isn’t it true that too often life slips and seeps away from us, so that day by day we are only partly alive, partly present, partly real, partly here?

Whether you are a man or a woman, I invite you to imagine the nameless woman in the crowd. I invite you to imagine her weariness, how depleted she feels after these years of suffering and loneliness, how ardently she wants to see Jesus. If she could only touch his clothes -- that would be enough! She has no right to be here -- she knows that. If anyone caught her, she would be chased away, or worse. So she pushes her way through the crowd, dodging, darting, hiding her face, and sneaks up on Jesus from behind. Stealthily she reaches out her hand through the crush of bodies and elbows and sleeves, and -- oh, if could just touch the fabric of Jesus’ cloak with her fingertips, that would be enough! She stretches out her fingers and then -- she does it! She touches Jesus’ cloak! Instantly something happens in her body -- who knows what she feels? Does she feel something like an electric shock or a surge of energy? Or is she suddenly aware of a deep sense of calm, as if a fever has left her and she is finally at peace

³ Rick Morley, *Witness*, June 6, 2006, quoted in *Synthesis*, “Proper 8-Tradition,” June 28, 2009. This entire paragraph is

inside her skin? Whatever the sensation, the bleeding has stopped, and she knows it. Her body is intact. She is whole. And not just her body has been healed: because she is no longer bleeding, she can be restored to the community. She belongs to it again; she is welcome now to have a place.

This physical and social healing takes place in an instant, in the blink of an eye, and Jesus is immediately aware that power has gone forth from him. He turns about in the crowd, asking, "Who touched my clothes?" The disciples, as usual, are clueless, but Jesus continues to look around, and with fear and trembling, the woman comes forward, falls down before him, and tells him the whole truth.

What a lovely phrase: she tells him "the whole truth." It is only then, after this face-to-face, honest, and personal encounter, that Jesus confirms what has happened. "Daughter," he calls her, as if taking her under his wing and drawing her into his family, "your faith has made you well" -- words in Greek that can be translated as "Your faith has brought you salvation."

"Go in peace," Jesus says to her, "and be healed. Go in peace, and be whole."

Healing begins with desire, and it is completed and accomplished by a personal encounter with the God we meet in Jesus, by that startling and transforming experience of being deeply seen and known and loved. What would you feel if you were hiding in the crowd and Jesus was looking all around for you? Would you linger in the shadows, or would you approach him? If you came and stood before Jesus, or even fell at his feet, what would you say if you told the whole truth? What would happen within you if you heard him say to you, "Daughter, Son, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be whole"?

Jesus touches the untouchable -- he touches the woman who is bleeding, and the corpse of the little girl who has died. "Get up!" he says. "Arise!" He liberates the outcast, cleanses the sinful, and restores the dead to life. His healing moves out in every direction -- to Jew and Gentile, male and female, outcast and privileged, young and old -- creating communities of love wherever he goes. In his name and sharing his Spirit, we are sent out to be like Jesus in the world, intending the best for everyone, wanting everyone to be touched by the divine love that knows no bounds, so that other people can know, as we do, that weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning.