

“Touched by Trauma, Touched by Grace”

Mark 5:25-34

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“Who touched me?” Jesus feels a tug on his cloak. He feels power going out from him. The crowd is pressing around him, and the disciples express their disdain at his ridiculous question. After all, in the crush of bodies around him, everybody is touching other bodies. Jesus is persistent. He continues to look for the one who has reached out to him. As he examines the faces of people surrounding him, one particular face swims into his vision. A woman. Opening her mouth to speak, to address him. She falls into a crouch in front of him, and she begins to tell her story. Twelve years of bleeding, pain, suffering. Twelve years of not being able to practice her religious rituals because she is unclean because of the issue of blood. Twelve years of traumatic illness. She has seen all the doctors and tried every treatment available to her. Now her money is gone, and her situation is unchanged. This woman has exhausted her resources. She simply cannot heal herself.

Jesus listens. The people nearest to Jesus in the crowd also listen, waiting to hear how such a story will be received by their teacher. No doubt the woman’s voice shakes because she is doing something courageous—telling her story in public, risking humiliation or rejection. It takes courage for her to speak to this strange man about womanly problems. It takes courage to admit that she has come to the end of her resources. The whole truth, in this case, is not a pretty story. When she has finished, she waits to see whether she will be publicly embarrassed or sent away in shame. Jesus’s response is elegantly compassionate: “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.”

The woman is suddenly well. Her bleeding stopped as soon as she touched Jesus’s garment. She turns to walk away into a very different life than her previous existence. Jesus has not only healed her body, but he has also healed the trauma of her marginalization, her poverty, her shame. By allowing her to tell her story in the hearing of others, Jesus has given her a voice to name out loud what she has experienced. In the telling, her healing is complete. She returns to her family to learn to live without the burden of her illness.

We listen to the interaction of Jesus and the woman as people who need to be healed. This text might lead us to tremendous hope that healing is possible. It might lead us to despair, because despite strong faith, healing doesn’t always happen—at least not the way it happened to the hemorrhaging woman. Faith, in this story, does not refer to a set of beliefs. Although the woman has obviously heard things about Jesus and knows him to be a powerful healer, she does not know him personally. The woman’s faith is rooted in two things—a hope that Jesus can heal what no one else

can heal. And the recognition that she has come to the end of her capacity to heal herself. The hope, combined with the lack of a better option, leads her to Jesus. It is the realization that she cannot heal herself that causes her to take the risk of touching a man she had no business touching. Faith began, for her, at the moment when she knows beyond the shadow of a doubt that her own resources are not sufficient.

It is amazing how human beings cope. We have considerable resources gifted by God to heal ourselves. We have communities of science, communities of support. We have intellect. We have a drive to survive. But there are some events that exceed our capacity to cope.

Trauma is an experience that exceeds our capacity to cope. That's what trauma is—all our systems and strategies are overwhelmed by an event or series of events that traumatize us. While we might think that trauma is limited to car accidents, earthquakes, and plane crashes, trauma is much more likely to occur during our daily lives. Deep personal loss, abuse, negative childhood experiences, surgeries, injuries, and accidents. The degree of trauma experienced by an individual will depend on several factors—including access to resources and personal ability to cope. Trauma has an uncanny ability to persist beyond the actual event—and for some, it means reliving negative experiences like a loop—unable to escape from fragmented memories of painful events that are no longer happening yet shape our bodies and souls. We can be traumatized by what happens to us, or even by what we witness happening to others. I would argue that our entire culture is traumatized, by the pandemic, by political division, by racism, by violence. We who gather for worship today will have our own experiences of trauma—what we have seen and what we have experienced. Trauma is an unbearable burden, and it overrides our capacities. Trauma strips us of our agency and imagination. That is, it becomes difficult to act in a way that leads to healing—in fact, it sometimes becomes impossible to even imagine that healing is possible.

I have characterized the woman's illness as traumatic. In Mark's gospel, the healing happens immediately and seems complete. Her encounter with Jesus heals her trauma, so that she is free to go and live a new life. I struggle with the immediacy of the healing in this text because in my experience, healing from trauma is a much slower process. Healing is rarely immediate and rarely complete.

Jesus offers us a way forward, a pathway to healing in which we are accompanied and loved tenderly along the way. The woman's story teaches us about Jesus's capacity to heal even those wounds which persist beyond what is necessary and adaptive. We learn a lot about Jesus in this passage. He is persistent. He gives us space to tell our stories. His own body responds to the woman's touch—knowing that power has left him. Jesus has the capacity to heal us when we cannot heal ourselves.

In this story, it is the woman's reaching out that initiates the healing. While we might be tempted to spiritualize our interpretations of this passage, it is a story about

real bodies. A bleeding, suffering body. And the body of a man filled with healing power. In the encounter of these bodies, healing happens. How do you and I encounter Jesus? I wish it were as simple as reaching out and touching the hem of his garment. Jesus is no longer with us, but Jesus is among us in the strange logic of faith. Jesus is always near, close enough to touch. We reach out in prayer. We encounter him in the sacrament of the Lord's Table. We encounter him in community, in the Body of Christ that is alive and well in the world today. We have a different perspective on Jesus than the woman in the story. She knew only that he was a teacher and a healer. We know that Jesus has suffered a violent death at the hands of Rome. He was tortured and abused. He experienced trauma in all its overpowering ugliness. Thus, Jesus knows firsthand what it means to suffer. We also know that death is not the end of the story. We know that he was risen with healing in his wings. When we reach out to Jesus, we do so in the knowledge that there are not actually limits to God's capacity to heal and restore—to resurrect. Healing may not happen for us in the same manner or at the same speed that it happened for the woman, but healing is available, and we have immediate access to Jesus.

In this season of Lent, we remember Jesus's relentless march toward Jerusalem.

We prepare ourselves for the agony of the cross, never losing sight of the fact that the cross is not the end of the story. As a time of preparation, Lent is a good time to reflect on our spiritual practices. How do we encounter Jesus in our lives? Or more accurately, how does Jesus encounter us? The woman in the story initiates contact with Jesus, but he is the one to engage her. He persistently seeks her out of the crowd, making space for her in the crush of people, encouraging her to tell her story. Jesus bears witness to her trauma and to her healing.

In the same way, Jesus bears witness to us and our healing. We are invited to come to Jesus, to reach out and touch the hem of his garment, knowing that he will turn to us. He will listen to our stories of pain and suffering, and he will consider our faith in his ability to heal. Remember, our faith might only be the size of a mustard seed. It might be like a teaspoon of yeast, seeming insignificant. Faith, as I interpret it in this story, is about the recognition that we need help beyond what our own resources can offer. It is a turning toward God, even if we shake in our boots. This is not an absolute kind of faith—it is not certainty. It is a faith derived from hope, the hope that God's power and ability far exceeds our own. The woman in the story has tried everything and lost everything. It is only when she approaches Jesus that she finds a resource that can meet her needs. Faith may be as simple as a hunch that God will meet our needs.

He calls us Daughter. Son. Child. Once we have told our story and received Jesus's blessing, we are sent out to continue the work of healing. As I said a moment ago, healing, at least in our reality is a slow process. It begins with Jesus, and it continues in his power and presence throughout our lives. We do not have the resources, on our own, to resist temptation, survive the wilderness or heal ourselves.

Some of you may be familiar with the story of Tommy Dorsey, a jazz musician in the 1930s. When his wife and new son died in childbirth, he was bereft. How does one heal from that kind of pain? For Dorsey, the answer was straightforward. He turned to the God of the universe made known in Jesus Christ, his precious Lord.

Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;
Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light
Precious Lord, take my hand.

Dorsey recognizes the power of touch, and the healing that can happen when we reach out toward the Lord Jesus Christ. When we are tired, weak, and worn, we are invited to reach for Jesus—even just to grasp an inch of the fabric of his clothing. Like the woman, we might approach fearfully yet boldly, not sure of anything except that we need the power of Jesus to make us whole. When we tell our stories to Jesus and to one another, we acknowledge our dependence on Christ and Christ's body in the world. So let us tell the hard stories, the stories of trauma and recovery, the stories of suffering and healing. If you need help and healing, Jesus is waiting to listen, to bless, and to heal. Amen.