

Sermon TUMC - July 25, 2021

Body at rest

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Mark 5:21-43

Once upon a time, there was a woman who was tired. She was tired of having a never-ending period, tired of trying to get better, tired of the doctors who were eager to take her money and mansplain to her that there was nothing they could do about her “women’s problems.” She was tired of all the home remedies and of all the extra personal care measures. She was haemorrhaging, blood, money and hope. (She was probably also anemic.)

Then, a travelling healer came through her town. She had heard amazing things about him, even about demons being cast out.

Would this be the thing that could finally make her body right? Would his kind of healing allow her to stop this battle with her own body?

Something told her, in her gut, that she should seek him out.

When she got near, he was surrounded by a crowd, and, what’s was this? The leader of the synagogue was on his knees in front of this Jesus ben Joseph from Nazareth, begging him to come save his daughter who was dying.

The worn out woman remembers when Jairus’ daughter was born, it was right around the time her own illness had started, twelve years earlier. A lifetime. No doubt the girl would probably be starting her own monthly

bleeding any day now - if she survived. What a strange coincidence, twelve years. One of them was looking forward to bleeding, the mark of womanhood, and the other looking forward to it finally stopping. She couldn't even imagine what that would mark for herself.

It was quite something to see Jairus kneeling there in front of Jesus. "Most religious leaders had proved unreceptive to Jesus. Here [was] one who [was] willing to humble himself [], even in the presence of a crowd. He fell down and pleaded with Jesus."¹

Jairus must have been very desperate. Clearly he loved his daughter very deeply. The girl was fortunate to have someone to care so much for her, the woman had no such good fortune. She wondered what was wrong with the poor girl.

Well, this persistent woman was desperate too! She would choose to side with Jairus in believing that this healer was able to save her from her plight. That he was aligned with her own God, and that he was not one more dead-end charlatan or bogus cure.

The men, Jesus and his disciples and Jairus, were obviously in a hurry, but maybe she could just sneak in real quick and touch Jesus' prayer fringe or cloak, while he was on his way to the girl's house. She had heard of others doing this. Couldn't hurt to try.

She jostles the crowd, gets closer and closer, and then reaches out and, and — immediately — as soon as her fingers make contact she feels it an ... energy, a warmth, a power. She feels it deep in her body and she knows

¹Mark Believer's Church Bible Commentary, Timothy J. Geddert

that the bleeding has stopped right then and there. She is dumbfounded. She takes her hands away from his clothes and touches her lower belly, marvelling. Her intuition was right! This was it! The healing. This was worth all the effort she put into it. Thanks be to God, it is finished!

And, no harm done. Jesus can keep moving to attend to the dying girl.

But. He stopped. He turned around and started asking "Who is the woman who touched me?"²

He must have felt it too, the power that went out from him towards her. Apparently he experienced it in his body as well. She didn't realize that would happen, that healing went two ways! She was just hoping to sneak away the same way she had come in through the crowd.

He kept waiting, drawing her out, refusing to let her remain invisible. Even when his disciples pointed out how ridiculous it sounded to wonder who touched him in a crowd.

What did he want? Oh the fear of being publicly exposed with her "women's problems," her woman's body, or caught in her almost superstitious act of faith, the fear of drawing attention to herself, of holding up more important things, the fear of this unknown that was happening in her body.

She decided she should probably come forward so as not to hold things up even further for Jairus and his poor daughter. She gathered up her courage one more time and admitted, "I am the one who touched you."

² *Back to the Well*: the explicitly feminine participle in verse 32 specifies that Jesus "looked around to see the woman who had done it" p.34

Then Jesus looked at her, compassion and tenderness in his eyes. He understood what had happened between them. He did not scold her for touching him nor for interrupting. Instead, he listened to her tale of woe! Intent on every word. She told him all of it, the whole truth just spilled out! The bleeding, the doctors, the twelve years, the way she had lost everything. And he listened without any judgement or impatience.

He listened and then, this man with divine healing energy, called her daughter and told her that it was because of her own initiative, her own faith, that this all happened. Daughter, a term of endearment and belonging. He told her that she was saved. Not just healed, saved from her scourge.³

He wished her peace, Shalom. Oh, how she needed that going forward. It sounded so restful. Peace in body and peace in the rest of life. And she knew it in her gut, that it would be true.

It was like he knew that “what she had done needed to be exposed to the crowd, not because it was wrong but because it was right.”⁴ He commended her on her faith.

This woman who was saved by Jesus was still thinking of Jairus too. Surely his waiting also signalled a deep faith. He was waiting this whole time for Jesus to come heal his daughter. Then something very disturbing happened, his servants showed up saying it might be too late.

The woman who touched Jesus heard later that when he came to Jairus’ house they all thought the girl, was already dead. When they got there,

³ This is a word that parallels when Jesus was lashed. *Mastigos. Back to the well*, p. 45

⁴Mark Believer’s Church Bible Commentary, Timothy J. Geddert

Jesus told Jairus to follow her own example: "Do not fear, only believe."
She might make that her motto from now on!

She felt a bit responsible for holding things up when Jesus was on his way. But apparently there was plenty of healing power left, because Jesus spoke just as lovingly to the other daughter in this story. And instead of her touching him, he touched her, took her by the hand, and told her to get up. And the girl did! Thanks be to God! And he even knew that her body would need some food and made sure she got some. (Maybe she took an egg salad sandwich from the useless mourners.)

The woman wondered if the girl had felt it too, in her body, the salvation that came through Jesus' touch. She wondered what he had felt in that second exchange. Did that daughter have a special bond with him now too? Did they talk? Would she be able to hold on to the shalom in her body as she grew to be a woman?

Some books called gospels happened many decades later, written by people who had followed Jesus around. They didn't always see everything the same way when they told her story. No matter, she knew what she had experienced. She only wished that they didn't always call her by her affliction, "the hemorrhaging woman." Like that was all she was, a disease.

Much later, the mostly male interpreters of this event, as it is written by those same gospel writers, would try to make a big deal about the fact that she was an outcast, "ritually impure," they would claim. The woman who touched Jesus knew that she had not made him (or anyone else) unclean, since hands do not convey impurity according to Torah (see Lev 15:25-33).⁵

⁵ Women's Bible Commentary, Amy-Jill Levine, p 471

But they would write many tomes about how she had been ostracized from her community, marginalized, and so on and so forth for being unclean. Maybe they were also uncomfortable with her "women's issues" and the earthiness of a bleeding female body and had to make the story about something else.

She finds it incredible how they could get this part of the event so wrong and how this mistake would continue to be repeated over and over for centuries.

One female Jewish New Testament scholar, Amy-Jill Levine, in the 20th century, tries to push against this longstanding misconception. She writes: "The ritually impure ... are not "cast out;" their problem is not sin but illness or death. By touching them or allowing them to touch him, Jesus violates no purity law or cultural taboo; to the contrary, he heals bodies. ... To speak of "outcasts" requires asking, cast out from what and cast out by whom? To speak of the "marginal" requires asking marginal to what? Both terms typically serve to portray Judaism as an elitist, un-compassionate system over against the church. Such classifications are neither historically warranted nor theologically valid..." and have done a lot of damage in how first century Judaism is perceived.

The earlier interpreters misconstrued not only Jewish purity laws in the first century, but also totally overlooked the main event, the incredible salvation that was happening to her and to the girl's bodies! "The point is that those who were sick and dead are now alive and healthy not that Jewish practises have been transgressed or overcome." "To be celebrated in these accounts are the father's love manifest in his humility before Jesus, the

woman's courage and initiative in approaching Jesus, and Jesus' restoring of two women to life and health..."⁶

In the 21st century, a woman preacher now finds herself visiting these events described in what she knows as the Bible. She realizes that there are layers upon layers of meaning and interpretation that have come to bear on the story about the woman who touched Jesus and the girl whom Jesus touched.

For her part, she is trying to discern a thread of rest in the gospel of Mark's version of events, because that is the lens her congregation has chosen to apply this Summer.

The preacher learned that this woman's healing is the only healing in Mark that occurs "without the express intent of Jesus."⁷ It is extraordinary that this woman is healed on her own initiative, she does not request healing, but takes matters into her own hands." And Jesus affirms her for doing this.

"Her illness [had] drained her finances, leaving her destitute and in a deteriorated condition.... To the already heavy burdens of physical emotional and spiritual pain [were] added a failed trust bitter disappointment and economic disaster. She reached out to those with power within the system and they not only failed to help but contributed to her worsening condition until, at last her illness defined her being."⁸

⁶ Levine, quoted in *Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels*, by France Taylor Gench.

⁷ Elizabeth Malbon in, *Back to the Well*.

⁸ Karen Barta in *Back to the Well*, p. 49

Yet the woman in the story empowered herself to seek out her own path to healing. She reached out, touched Jesus, received his power and then told everyone publicly that she would no longer be defined by her past illness.

The preacher wonders:

What are the systems weighing you down?

What is no longer working for you?

How might you take initiative to move towards God and receive restoration and reprieve?

Another thing the preacher sees is how interpreters of scripture throughout time have tended to overlook the experiences of bodies. She wonders why. Some Christians even speak of Jesus “saving souls,” as if we all lived in disembodied states. We do not. It is clear in his interaction, while healing her body that Jesus tells the woman that she is saved. The same is true for the girl.

Meister Eckhart a mystic from the thirteenth century, reminds us that “the soul loves the body.” “Eckhart did not see the soul as dualistically opposed to the body, but as a guide to the body’s experience. Because God took on a human body in Christ and is present within humanity, the body is sacred.”⁹

The preacher is aware, even in her own body and in the global culture in which she lives, how much damage is done by disregarding bodies and by believing that God is present only in more “spiritual” or intellectual matters. Bodies have become something to act upon, to beat into shape, to conquer through pain or deprivation, to diagnose or cure and, depending on their shape or age, bodies are a means of defining someone’s value and even identity. Today many people live at odds with their bodies.

⁹ <https://cac.org/meister-eckhart-part-2-2017-09-29/>

On the other hand we might over-value our body's appearance, or it's potential longevity, or presume that all bodies must function in a certain way. And neglect the way our bodies function to communicate more spiritual matters to us: the gut feeling, the quickening of the heart, the pangs of love, the wisdom of slowing down.

A body's truths cannot be denied. It will call for action, if we are listening deeply.

Finally, all these years later, we still do not know the women's names in this story. The woman is defined to us by her affliction and the sick girl by her relationship to a powerful man. They are labelled by their body and by their social status. All these years later our society is still doing this to each other. Labelling and putting in place. Judging on the appearance, limiting identity to illness, or gender or capacity.

Perhaps it is time to bring bodies back into our awareness and to our experiences of the Divine. Perhaps it is time to realign the values in our society, or at least within the Church, on how we perceive and judge our bodies.

If you were the one seeking Jesus' help today what would it mean for your body? How do you need to be saved in this present moment?

What would your body need to find shalom, wholeness and rest?

God is ready to respond to your initiatives toward wholeness, your acts of faith.

Shalom to you.