

THE TOUCH

(02/06/2022)

Scripture Lessons: Leviticus 12:1-8

Mark 5:21-34

“She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak for she said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.’ Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.” (Mark 5:27-29)

This past summer, which seems like a long, long time ago, I said that throughout the summer months and probably even into the coming year, we would focus our Sunday morning reflections on the Gospel of Mark. Mark is my favorite gospel. It was the first gospel to be written, and it is written in a very simple and direct manner. It provides us with an early picture of Jesus, his words, his actions, and his healings. When I read Mark, I feel I am returning to the source. I feel that it brings me closer to Jesus.

Our scripture lesson for this morning was taken from the fifth chapter of Mark. I guess this means that we haven't moved very far in our collective Sunday morning Bible study! That's ok. I'm not in a hurry. In fact, I suspect that we should go back and spend a little more time on the first four chapters, for they contain some real “gold.” In any event, today we are focusing on Mark's account of Jesus' healing of the woman who has been bleeding for twelve years.

Parallel accounts of this healing miracle are found in Matthew 9 and Luke 8. In Mark and Luke, the woman's condition is described as a “flow of blood.” In Matthew it is described as a “hemorrhage.” Although the texts are not specific, it is apparent that the woman is suffering from a menstrual problem, perhaps following a childbirth or miscarriage. The treatments of her physicians, which have drained all her financial resources, have been to no avail.

The Old Testament reading from Leviticus reminds us that in the ancient world, women were regarded as mysterious and unclean, even evil. Lacking knowledge of the anatomical and physiological aspects of ovulation, men must have been puzzled by a woman's menstrual cycle. It must have been especially unsettling for men when they realized that a woman's menstrual cycle was somehow related to the tides and the twenty-eight-day cycle of the moon.

In pagan religions, the moon was the realm or the religious symbol of the Great Goddess, the feminine aspect of divinity. Menstrual bleeding was a type of bleeding that was quite unlike anything that men, who were raised to be warriors, had ever experienced. During a woman's menstrual cycle, and also following childbirth, until the woman went through a ritual bathing or other act of purification, she was considered unclean and was not allowed to enter the sanctuary.

For hundreds of thousands of years, people have experienced and worshipped divinity in nature. Even in ancient times they realized that some divine spirit was responsible for the creation of life. They felt awe in the presence of the mysterious force that pushed the little blade of grass out of the ground, that shaped the mighty oak, and that found expression in the cycles of the seasons. They experienced the workings of this divine spirit in the starry night, in the light-giving sun and moon, in the fructifying rain and the earth that received it. All life was alive with divinity and mystery! It was natural that people in ancient times should have experienced this divine force as feminine, for it gave birth to life and nourished life, two natural functions of human women.

As human consciousness evolved, the ancient Israelites and other people around the world began to experience God in new ways. In addition to the experience of God as feminine, as the Great Goddess, people began to experience God as masculine. This masculine experience of God was different from what had previously been experienced. It gave rise to an evolution in human consciousness, to linear thinking, to a structured moral code. Without this discovery of the masculine face of God and the masculine dimension of consciousness in both men and women, it is doubtful whether human consciousness would have continued to evolve.

In some countries, this masculine experience of God co-existed with the feminine experience of God, taking the form of gods and goddesses. This was the case, for example, with Zeus and Hera in Greece, with Osiris and Isis in Egypt, and in India where all the masculine gods of Hinduism have female consorts. In China, the circular Tao, the creative spirit of the universe, found differentiation in two forms: the yin, which was feminine, and the yang, which was masculine. They were, as Lao Tzu put it, “not two, not one.”

In other parts of the world, this masculine experience of God supplanted the feminine experience. This is what happened in ancient Israel. Yahweh, the God of Israel, was experienced and described as a jealous god, a god who could not coexist with a feminine counterpart; hence the worship of nature and the feminine principle of the universe were forbidden. This led to the persecution of those labeled as pagans, for the word “pagan” simply refers to someone who experiences God in nature.

As you know, I do not regard the Bible as the inerrant word of God. I believe the Bible is one among many records of people’s experiences of God. To be sure, it is a very special record for us as Christians because it tells us how people experienced the God who we believe became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. I confess I am not as interested in the Old Testament God as I am in the God of Jesus, the God whom Jesus knew intimately, the God who became flesh in Jesus, for I am not sure the two are the same. I have the feeling that Jesus was the incarnation of a

deeper and a more profound level of spirituality than the tribal warrior God of the ancient Israelites.

Regarding the experience of God in ancient Israel, we read in Leviticus that God said to Moses,

Say to the people of Israel, "If a woman conceives, and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean for seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. . . Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying; she shall not touch any hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed. But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean for two weeks, as in her menstruation, and she shall continue in the blood of her purifying for sixty-six days."

According to what was revealed to Moses, the God of Israel dictates that a woman who gives birth is unclean. Here we have a prime example of how religion can take a perfectly beautiful experience and screw it up! (As if we needed more examples!) We also note that a woman is *twice as unclean* if she gives birth to a little girl than if she gives birth to a little boy! Some feminists would probably regard this as sexist, and I'm afraid I would have to agree with them. Perhaps you can understand why I do not regard the Bible as the inerrant word of God.

This passage of scripture tells us how people experienced God three to four thousand years ago in a specific culture. I don't have a problem with recognizing how the ancient Israelites experienced God, since I can understand how mysterious a woman's menstrual cycle must have been to primitive men. But the designation of woman as inferior and unclean is different from my experience of God, from my experience of women, and from what I believe Jesus would teach us about women and about the feminine side of men in twenty-first century America. I don't mean this as a criticism; all I am saying is that Moses' experience of God was shaped by his culture, by his historical context, as is mine.

From the record of scripture, it appears that Jesus did not devalue women. I believe that Jesus incarnated such a deeper dimension of God that the people of his time regarded him and his teaching as counter-cultural and even dangerous. I don't think we can fully grasp how radical an act it was for Jesus to allow himself to be touched by a menstruating woman. This valuing of women, of women's bodies, and women's mysteries was a revolutionary stance! Our gospel lesson gives us an important insight into the kind of person that Jesus was. We need to bear this in mind in our continuing quest to find the God that was incarnated in Jesus, and to affirm and protect women's rights, especially their reproductive rights in our time, in our country, and around the world (e.g., in Afghanistan under Taliban rule).

Getting back to the woman of the story, she probably seeks Jesus because she has heard rumors about him. She has heard reports of his healing miracles. Because of these rumors, out of a mixture of curiosity and faith, she approaches him in search of her own healing.

The woman is symbolic of many. She is symbolic of the multitudes who have heard rumors about Jesus' healing powers, and the multitudes who have not. There are many who know Jesus, but there are also many who do not, either because they live in lands where other religions predominate or because of negative experiences they may have had as children in the church. Our relationship with God as Christians is shaped by what we know about Jesus and by our experience of the risen Christ, the Holy Spirit who dwells within our hearts. Since I believe the Holy Spirit dwells within everyone, on some level, all people know Jesus! However, for some people, both Christian and non-Christian, the healing power of Jesus still falls into the general category of a rumor.

The woman, who has been suffering for twelve years (a number symbolic of wholeness), comes to Jesus as a last resort. In this she is not unlike us. Jesus tells us he stands at the door of our heart and knocks. All we need to do is open the door. The resources for physical, emotional, and spiritual healing are always within our reach, but we too often reach out to Jesus only as a last resort. We too often turn to our faith only in time of great need, only when our backs are to the wall.

In the shipwreck scene of Shakespeare's, *The Tempest*, the mariners speak for all those in danger from the storm when they cry: "All lost! To prayers, to prayers! All lost!" For this panic-stricken crowd, prayer is apparently not an integral part of their life, not something to live with, but something to die with. They turn to their religion when all is lost. For them, God is not a pilot for the night-sea journey of life; God is the final desperate resort, the lifesaver or lifeboat in a time of shipwreck.

The woman in our scripture passage may also be symbolic of our nation and the world. My father used to ask me how people know that Jesus' way would not be the solution to the problems of the world when we have never tried it? The woman suffered from an incurable illness for twelve years. Our world and our nation have been afflicted with the cancers of war, exploitation, racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, and a callous disregard for human suffering for a lot longer than that!

The woman has apparently tried various remedies to no avail. We human beings have tried militarism, nationalism, imperialism, fascism, capitalism, communism, materialism--all of them, and we are still suffering and still inflicting suffering on others! I wonder what would happen if the world would turn to Jesus. I don't mean that the whole world needs to become

Christian, but that we all, no matter what our religion, need to find the living spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit within our hearts.

The woman is part of the crowd that surrounds Jesus, but she is also distinct from the crowd.

Jesus is surrounded by the crowd. People are all around him, bumping up against him. Suddenly he feels that a power has gone out of him, that someone has drawn healing power from him. He stops and asks his disciples, "Who touched me?" The disciples don't understand. They ask, "What do you mean? A lot of people have touched you." Jesus says, "I know a lot of people have touched me today, but one person has touched me in a special way."

How could Jesus have been sensitive to a single individual in such a large crowd? This was a mystery to the disciples. At times, many of us also wonder. We read in the scriptures that God knows and cares what happens to the little sparrow. We read that God calls each of us by name and cares for us as if God had no other children. We read that we are important to God as individuals, no matter what our status or station in life. But do we really believe it?

How can this God who is the creator, the creating spirit of the universe, be sensitive to each of us as individuals? Is this great creative energy of the universe also personal? No matter how important we think we are, and as narcissistic individuals at times we think we are *very* important, this is difficult to believe. I have a hunch that this is one of the reasons we are slow to turn to God in prayer. Do we really believe that God hears our individual prayers?

As a little girl from Michigan once said in a prayer she wrote to God, "Dear God, I know you listen to prayers from people all around the world. But can you tell me when you are especially listening to the prayers from people in Detroit." When we think of God as a being located somewhere up in the sky or in the farthest reaches of the universe, this way of thinking is inescapable. It might be more helpful, however, to think of God as a creative spirit that is both impersonal, in that it is everywhere, and also personal, intimately related to each of us, closer to us than we are to ourselves.

The woman is part of the crowd and yet she is distinct from the crowd.

The crowd surrounds Jesus. They want to see him, to hear him, to be near him. One woman seeks him in a different way. This woman, out of her great need, turns to him in faith. She realizes that she stands in need of healing. She believes that if she can but touch the hem of his garment, she will be healed.

There are two kinds of relationship we can have with Jesus. We can be like the crowd, or we can be like the woman. Those in the crowd do not realize their need to be healed. They want to be near Jesus, but not too near! Their faith does not draw them to reach out and touch him, or to be touched by him in a special way. In fact, they probably are just as comfortable keeping Jesus at arm's length. When we touch Jesus, or when we are touched by Jesus, it can transform our life! It can heal the inner wound, that lingering malady which, like the woman's bleeding, can consume the years of our lives. It can also call us forth as disciples, as followers of the Way.

Like the woman, we need to touch Jesus. We need to be touched by Jesus. God grant that as we draw near to Jesus in worship and in prayer, we will experience his healing touch.

*A reflection shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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