

Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

The Gospel | Mark 5:21–43

Date | June 27, 2021



**ALL
SAINTS'**
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Earlier this week, I was gifted an invitation to contribute to a World Council of Churches Bible study manual, specifically focused on health and healing. Having spent the past fifteen months thinking about health with a very different part of my brain, in crisis management mode leading this church through a pandemic, this week's invitation gleefully transported me back to a previous life I had led as a biblical scholar. My tiny sub-speciality is called 'Contextual Bible Study' and my own work focused on reading the gospel of Mark with individuals who struggle with poor mental health. As it turns out, one of the passages I read with my reading groups those years ago was the story we heard today of a woman with hemorrhages, a sickly daughter and her father Jairus, and Jesus.

When comparing the world of biblical studies and the insights of everyday readers like mine, a striking divergence becomes immediately clear. For scholars, there is an almost ubiquitous fascination with the external world of biblical characters with little interest shown in their internal lives.

Our reading from Mark today is a great case in point. It's a fascinating double-tale, a healing story within another healing story. It's worth a whole sermon series, but today I'd just like to focus on the woman with hemorrhages because how we learn to see characters like her offers an important perspective into how we might learn to see our own life as a church.

Mark makes it clear that the woman had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years, and had endured much under many physicians, spending all that she had. She had got no better, but rather grew worse. In spite of all of this unusually high level of detail for Mark, her significance is interpreted in most New Testament studies as symbolic. She is seen to represent ritual uncleanliness because of her bleeding, or socio-cultural subservience because of her status as a woman in ancient Israelite society. She is also viewed as an emblem of faithfulness, or for some scholars she is little more than a vehicle for Jesus' power to overcome sickness or his willingness to cross boundaries of gender, purity, and poverty. In other words, as is the case with so many so-called minor characters in the Bible, the multi-dimensional nature of her humanity, her life as a person, is of little to no interest to most biblical scholarship.

My experience of reading this passage with people whose struggles with mental illness mean that they also are often relegated to being cultural symbols and emblems – mad, bad, or broken – is that a whole new world of interpretation opened up that focused on the woman's internal life.

These readers imagined her fear and whether she doubted being able to sustain herself, an interpretive insight that gave texture to the consequent depth of her hope. They related to the woman's years of struggle and suffering at the hands of physicians and perhaps also those people who controlled the religious and political life of the village, like Jairus. Through the eyes of these readers, the woman became someone, someone perhaps a little like them, too often rendered invisible by the outside world's failure to look in.

It's worth pausing here to ask where we find ourselves in the middle of these contrasting set of biblical interpretations: between trained biblical scholars and everyday readers? How often do we go about life making conclusions about the people around us based on what we believe they symbolize or represent? And how easy is it for us to simply overlook the action and agency of those in society who like the woman in Mark's gospel also lead marginal lives?

They're significant questions for us to ponder if we are serious about the capacity the Bible has to speak into our lives. In fact, one of the most prominent short-hand messages the Bible as a whole has for globally affluent people like you and I is, 'never underestimate the power of the poor'. This was certainly the message my Bible study readers wished to convey. For beyond their thicker description of her humanity, readers also saw the potency of the woman's agency, specifically the power of her touch and of her reach.

Touch is a deeply significant act in the Bible. Jesus touches people frequently as they are healed, as he does for Jairus's daughter at the end of the story we hear today. Moses' staff touches the rock as the miracle of water gushes forth. Indeed, the very beginning of life for humankind happens with the touch of the Creator upon the lips of the created, breathing life into Adam's unanimated form.

Even more theologically significant is reach. The outstretched hand is a powerful symbol and an effective expression of divine power. Moses stretches out not merely his own hands over the Red Sea to part the waters and thus save the Hebrews, his is an action of God's power flowing through him. We hear repeatedly in the scriptures how the LORD's hand will save. And just a few chapters before in Mark, 3:1-6, a man stretches out his withered hand in the synagogue with Jesus, and his malady is healed.

For the group readers I read alongside, it is the agency of the woman with hemorrhages in today's gospel to reach and touch the divine-man Jesus that results in her healing. Mark himself offers a simple statement of the woman's belief: "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." The readers describe the woman's consequent actions as 'getting herself saved', of 'taking something from Jesus', of 'touching his divinity' such that something 'went out from him'. The woman reaches and touches and joins in the divine movement of God. Like 3rd Century theologian and biblical scholar Origen who posited that the woman has a 'certain divine touch' to her, for readers who have known for themselves what it is like to be subject to others' power to make them well, there is a deep

poignancy that this woman is seen as the agent of her own healing. As such, it is the woman who helps Jesus expand his vision of the kingdom of God, who helps him see that transformational power is not merely dispensed but mutually curated.

As a biblical scholar, I found working with readers who struggled with mental illness to be an immense gift intellectually and spiritually. As a priest, their insights into the scriptures was revelatory. For they said to me that without the agency, without the reach and the touch of those who are so readily left at the margins of society, the church is missing a fuller understanding of how God's power operates in the world around us.

In light of such a claim, what then should we think of the work of those who live in friendship with refugees, a thirty plus years ministry in this church which we give thanks for today on All Saints' Refugee Ministries Sunday?

On one hand, our ministry among refugees is a remarkable witness to the goodness and grace that people can bring forth when they offer their hearts and their gifts to others in greater need than theirs. None of us should underestimate the significance of what has been possible for people who came to this country as refugees and then encountered a church in All Saints' that offered support and sustenance in their first years here and in cases for many years afterwards. Thanks be to God for each person here and all those who have been part of that work over these past three decades.

On the other hand, and as many if not all of the volunteers here today may have experienced for themselves, the real miracle is what happens when lives of exclusion become encounters of embrace. For it is then that mutuality enters the scene. It is not simply that we begin to see our own privilege, our opportunities for flourishing, and our relationships with others with deeper gratitude and a fuller vitality; the miracle is that God begins to make things new. When we widen the circle of what we believe the church should be, when we reach and touch, and crucially when we are reached for and touched and lay down our power long enough to feel that movement of the divine between us and others, the kingdom of God begins to grow.

Imagine how All Saints' would be if this was a community where the excluded and marginalized felt that they could reach and touch others, not as recipients of our help but as fellow travelers on the Way of Jesus Christ? What would a truly mutual community look like where people living in poverty, those living on streets we barely know never mind travel down, began to make life here. What if our core ministries - our ministry among refugees, and at Threads, Covenant Community and the Midtown Assistance Center - described not something we did but the kind of people we became. Put another way, what do you imagine happened to Jesus after the woman with hemorrhages reached and touched and made herself well? Mark's gospel tells us that the woman told Jesus the whole truth. What truth did Jesus hear? How did he grow more fully into the calling placed upon his life, because of her?

That question about Jesus became our question at the church I previously served in San Diego some years ago. We had also been encountered by a woman who lived at the margins. Her name was Jenny. She slept at night under the eaves of our church building and mostly kept at a distance from others. One morning, we found Jenny lying not in front of the church but by the sidewalk. It was clear something was wrong, and shortly afterwards we called an ambulance. Momentarily, Jenny's life that she had intentionally led at a distance from others touched ours. One of the women on our staff held her hand as the first responders rushed in. She died shortly thereafter of what turned out to be liver failure.

We would have never known about Jenny's life if we hadn't held a funeral for her later that month. Her family gathered with us from across southern California. We adorned the altar with framed pictures of her from happier times, we shared stories of her life, and held hands making a giant circle of prayer as we commended her to the eternal embrace of God. It was one of the most holy nights of my life. It had a penetrating kind of luminosity to it. People who were clearly unaccustomed to the patterns of religious life and liturgy reached out and touched us, and in a gracious and mystical way, Jenny did too.

Why is it important that the circle of the church be cast as widely as is possible? Why is it essential that everyone, no matter their age, or wellness, or standing, or doubts, have a place at this table of grace where in each morsel of bread every person is gifted a foretaste of God's beloved community? All of this matters because without such a vision for what it means to be the Body of Christ, the church cannot thrive, it cannot grow deeper, and we would all leave long before the miracle happens, for others, but also for us.

What view of the world will you loosen your grip on to empty your hands so they might reach out to others? Which life might yours touch and be touched by, freed from the need to be right or righteous but simply present, and open, and loved of God? How might we, the church, be changed?