

Laura Fitzpatrick-Nager
Sermon: Healing Power

Mark 5: 25-34
June 23rd, 2024

Every month for nearly 4 years I've had the pleasure of teaching a Bible study class at Essex Meadows. A group of 8-10 of us gather together to read the stories of women in the Bible. The average age of my fellow Bible explorers is 90 and their wisdom and insights about not only scripture but our own storied lives in response, is an ongoing gift to me.

Beginning with the Hebrew Scriptures, we've covered many stories of midwives and warriors, matriarchs and mother in laws, enslaved women like Hagar and those who were known as church leaders and prophets. We've wrestled with the so-called, the "*Bad Girls of the Bible*" from Eve in the opening Book of Genesis to Mary Magdalene in the gospels and many of the anonymous ones in between.

We've read the shortest book in the bible, the Book of Ruth, and tried to listen in closely to the longest conversation Jesus has with anyone from the gospel of John: the Samaritan woman at the Well. We've challenged ourselves to read between the lines, to use what scholars call the *hermeneutic of suspicion*, diving deeper into the nuances of the text itself, pushing back against rigid interpretations and stereotypes layered on top of women since the ancient Israelites wandered through the desert. We've noticed who is and isn't there in the story and how that speaks volumes about who matters in a society and who holds the power. Who is free?

How many women in the bible can you name? Most of us can only name a handful. Ever hear of Shiprah and Puah, Tamar, Priscilla, Chloe, Lydia, Apphia, Nympha? History has incorrectly painted women in the Bible with a discriminatory brush- if they are even mentioned at all. But they are there! Scripture as we know was used to define women's roles in marriage and life, as property and procreators, largely.

In the ancient world, you were generally defined by your fertility or lack thereof. Some texts are just too hard to read and yet they inform the human journey and our understanding that not all stories have happy endings. (We've yet to read feminist scholar Phyllis Trible's famous book called, *Texts of Terror* published 40 years ago...)

We are made of stardust and stories, wrote one poet. And these biblical stories function as a mirror to say something true about the human experience—whether in the ancient world or our world today. Who are the insiders and outsiders? Where might grace be found in the midst of brokenness and abuse? Where is the action of God felt? Or not?

(What is being healed as the human heart searches for God?)

A few weeks ago, our Bible study group grappled with today's gospel story. It is an anonymous woman known only by her condition. Identified as the "hemorrhaging woman" in Mark's gospel, hers is the story of suffering. And ultimately of healing.

Who knows what kind of story Mark is telling here, but in Mark's gospel Jesus is always responding to the least important one in the crowd. The 1 out of the 99.

We can surmise from the text that this person has probably been marginalized for the twelve years she's had her disease. Taboos and mystery around blood would have isolated her from her community and relationships.

The enormously moving part of this narrative, I think, is the where Jesus –though the crowds seeking his attention are pressing in on him, and who knows how noisy, dusty and chaotic it might have been...

Yet, Jesus feels the touch of this one person, this chronically disabled outsider. She's unnamed, female and has sought many physicians out for answers to her illness to no avail. By now, she's probably known in her community as "the sick one", the sick one with woman's troubles no less. A social pariah.

A dear friend of mine suffers from long covid and has for the better part of a year. As a professional educator she travels the country speaking and teaching teachers. The relentless symptoms of headache and fatigue render her completely unable to function at times. The unpredictability and chronic pain have affected her life and work profoundly. And been a financial drain as well.

The medical community is stymied by Long Covid. and the countless physicians my friend's been examined by have offered little relief. She's on a waitlist for an appointment at a Long Covid clinic in November-the earliest date available.

Like my friend, the hemorrhaging woman in the bible is determined to change something, try anything to get some relief...even if it entails pushing her way, crawling her way into the crowd to touch Jesus' clothing.

In the dynamic space between her courageous reach and Jesus' compassionate awareness, healing happens. Whatever mystery unfolded in the touch of her grasping hand, Jesus *felt* something. The formerly ill person knew it deep within herself and Jesus knew it, too.

Mark writes,

"Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" (verse)

I wonder about the physicality of this whole scene from the jostling of the crowd...if you've ever been in Times Square a half hour before show time on a Saturday night you know that feeling, the press of the crowds! Come to think of it, LBS on opening day is like that too!

So the crowd, the hand tugging at his clothes, the trembling woman who falls down before Jesus in response to his repeated question, "Who touched me???"

Often in other healing gospel stories, Jesus is doing the reaching out, the touching of eyes, the laying on hands, the sharing of his abilities as healer. And here, Jesus feels the power go out of him. What do you make of that?

We live in a world where the use and abuse of power for personal benefit for some commercial or reputational gain is commonplace, heralded even...Power over another, power exerted to control or to contain or abuse is the name of the game. (I can name a world leader or two like that, can't you?)

But Jesus models another way. And that way, the way of love and healing leads to freedom, freedom for the person seeking relief and the person ministering. Freedom for the whole community is impacted... For Jesus, the most important thing in that moment is to face the person who has touched him, to meet her as a human being and call her into community again with a new name, Beloved, "Daughter" . Jesus in this way reinforces her kinship and belonging.

Pulitzer Prize Winning author Toni Morrison, wrote, "The function of freedom is to free someone else."

The function of freedom is to free someone else. Yes!

For the first time in over a decade, this "Daughter" of Jesus, this beleaguered body has been freed up, made well in whatever way.

Her faith that something would happen if she just showed up and tried to touch him matters in the healing process.

Her courage -that even in her fear and trembling, to speak out- to respond to Jesus' question... What was now hidden can be seen in all her glory.

Interestingly, church tradition has named this woman "Veronica" meaning, "she who speaks the truth". That reminds me of another famous verse, "the truth shall set you free" (John 8:32)

At the end of the text, Jesus blesses this new "Daughter" and sends her on her way into her new life. It strikes me that she is not only free of her condition but she's free of the burden she's carried.

All of it changes her life; The reach, the touch and the telling of her story, All of it leads to her healing. Healing is an active verb; it's ongoing, never finished.

This person's determination and declaration of her owning her own story, the speaking of the truth and the pain of it in front of everyone, reminds me of what often happens for folks who participate in AA groups.

They speak out loud the truth of themselves, bravely telling their life story to those gathered in "the rooms."

Taking shame and fear and making it visible.

In this way, participants move from hiding in the shadows and shame into the light of the community and new life. It's a powerful healing journey, too.

One full of hardship, grit and grace.

How does healing happen?

Who gets healed and who doesn't?

Why does God seem to act here but not everywhere?
What's faith got to do with it?

This is one of those many biblical narratives that bring more questions than answers. My sense is that we've all been this person at one time or another, or known someone hemorrhaging grief, living through trauma, managing the isolation of lingering illness and the flowing of pain without an end in sight.

And it brings us to our knees until all we can do is reach out. Or help someone else to try again.

Writes Frederick Buechner, "It is that life-giving power that is at the heart of this moving story and that I believe is at the heart of all our stories—the power of new life, new hope, new being, that whether we know it or not, I think, keeps us coming to places like this (church) year after year in search of it."¹

As a church, we are a people of many kinds of bodies in a place of mercy, healing and care. We endeavor with God's grace to live out of the theology of healing and care that Jesus taught. That all bodies in their beauty and brokenness are signifiers of the divine touch. It's part of our communal responsibility, too.

We share in the shouldering of one another's burdens, the holding of one another's stories and with courage, can keep accompanying one another through the darkness and the daylight.

I think that's the mystery at the center of whatever this dance called faith and God is as we reach out to touch that hem.

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¹ Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark.