

An End to Shame

“Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. 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. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, ‘Who touched my clothes?’ ... He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.’”

This is an inconceivable story. Being so far away in time and culture, we have no idea of the scandal this event would have posed. Certainly, it would have challenged the sensibilities of Mark’s early listeners, and to those who were eyewitnesses when this interaction unfolded, it would have been nearly incomprehensible.

And with my thanks to Hebrew scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann, I want us to consider this woman...she is a pitiful soul, a non-person in her society really, inhabiting the furthest margins of life. She stands at the edge of the crowd and watches. What we hear first about her is that her body is a mess. She is diseased—a carrier of pain.^[1]

She has been bleeding for twelve years. That’s twelve years of life and vitality literally flowing out of her and despite her best efforts to get help. We are told she has become poor in her pursuit for health, yet still she bleeds. She is an outcast, an untouchable, ritually unclean and as she approaches the crowd, she is at best *unwelcome*.

She is like a lot of people who dwell at the edge of the crowd. All carriers of pain in some form. They are all standing in the shadows where society or religious institutions tell them they belong. They suffer from the pain of indifference or the pain of poverty—they have pain from loneliness, pain from rejection, pain from addiction or abuse, pain from bigotry about their gender, sexuality or the color of their skin or because of the country from which they came—all people it would seem, who are at times an inconvenient intrusion on the “good” people of the world.

But this woman breaks away from this desperate edge and makes one last hungry grab for healing and a better life. The circumstances of her life may have stolen her dignity and wealth, but she still has the courage and imagination to try one last option. Though her disease has made her unclean and the religious institution has told her she is outside of God’s love and care, somehow she just doesn’t quite believe it. So, she reaches out a trembling hand and she learns what it means to touch grace.

As Biblical Scholar Walter Brueggemann says: she reaches out to touch power. “Her frail, extended hand enacts the drama of pain touching power. She says, ‘If I can only touch his clothes, I will be made well.’ She enacts bold, body-to-body, person-to-person contact that cuts through her poverty, brokenness, despair and shame.” This is no tentative, half-hearted fumbling—this is a real touch, undertaken by an untouchable, a touch that shatters the neat division between the well and the sick, the acceptable and the disreputable. She overrides all the categories that belong to her disability.”

[1] Walter Brueggemann

Even in the press and noisy jostling of the crowd, Jesus knows that he has been touched with purpose and pleading. He did not know the woman was near---the healing happened simply by his presence. We understand in this moment that Jesus is so “saturated with the power for life that the power spills over into those around him.”

With new life and new hope flowing through her, this woman on the edge of life has touched Jesus and even as she is healed, Jesus knows he has just touched unspeakable pain. “Who touched me?” Jesus is not content to let this much pain go unnoticed and fade back into the crowd—he wants to bring it out into the middle of all the good people present and teach them something new about God and power.

He surprises her and no doubt stuns the crowd as he does not shame, scold or abuse her. Instead, he calls her daughter. With this one word he welcomes her back to the human family. The healing love of God in Christ has no time for cultural taboos or religious conventions. Jesus crushes them all. Not only does he touch a woman in public, he touches a bleeding woman in public, and then he counts her a full member of his family of faith---he names her in a way that honors her.

Finally, he dismisses her with a blessing: “Go in peace.” Go in holiness, go in *wholeness*—no more bleeding, no more loss of life, no more shame, but now full healthy joyous human life. On Sunday you will hear the rest of the story. Jesus continues along on his scandalous way and he then does no less for Jairus’ daughter. Jesus liberates not only those on the margins—he has come to liberate us all.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+