

Unnamed Women of the Bible: Her Courage to Seek Healing **Zephaniah 3:14-19 Mark 5:21-34**

This morning, as we continue our sermon series on the women of the Bible, for the remainder of Lent (4 weeks) we are going to reflect on some of the *unnamed* women of the New Testament. These stories, mostly, are about women who advocated for themselves in some way. We don't know who they were and we aren't given a lot of information about them except for their life circumstances and how they sought after, and advocated for, their well-being. This morning's story of an unnamed woman from the gospel of Mark involves a healing.

Along that line... as is frequently observed by folks as they read the gospels, especially those who read the gospels for the first time, or with fresh eyes, it is noted that Jesus' reputation from the very start of his public ministry was, "People get well around this guy." And, those who experienced healing at his hand very quickly spread the word about their experience. And as a result, people flocked to him—many for healing, or for the healing of a loved one, some just out of curiosity, and some who thought, "If this is what he can do, I want to be a follower!"

I want to impress upon us that it wasn't his teaching, primarily, that made him famous, or his winsome personality or charm, or his ability to tie fancy balloon animals. It was his healing power. His love, God's love, revealed through making people well, and whole.

I don't think this gets talked about enough. God didn't just send Jesus to save peoples' souls so they can go to heaven when they die. Jesus was sent to be the face of God, the presence of God to the world, the heart of God and God's love, and what that face and that presence and that heart represented, right from the start of Jesus' public ministry and throughout his life, and through his death and resurrection, was: God wants people to be well *here and now*. To experience healing and wholeness—in the many ways that people experience healing and wholeness.

Now, the miraculous healing of an infirmity may sometimes be hard to fathom in our modern, scientific, enlightened world. Or perhaps we know of someone with deep faith who was not healed, and we are left wondering why. And it's a good question to ask ("why?"). It's a Biblical question, actually. But scripture is filled with a rich array of stories in which a person encounters Jesus,

and undergoes some sort of transformation that leads to new life and new possibilities.

This morning we have one of those stories, that not only illustrates Jesus' desire and power to heal, but also highlights Jesus' regular habit of breaking cultural and religious norms and traditions, for the sake of persons and for the Kingdom. This story, though, would not be told if it weren't for this woman's chutzpah, setting an example for us of what it's like to approach Jesus with courage and boldness; because she, too, broke cultural and religious norms and traditions, for the sake of her own wellbeing.

Mark 5:21-34

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live."

So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. 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?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

This is the word of the Lord.

As we reflect on this story for a few minutes in preparation for communion, and learn from this courageous woman, I'd like to first talk about Jesus' naughty habit of crossing cultural and religious borders, breaking norms and traditions. In this encounter, there are two big ones. Or, it may be more accurate to say that he affirms the breaking of norms and tradition of a person who is seeking help; and therefore, he becomes complicit in them—because he doesn't uphold the social and religious conventions.

First, Jesus speaks with a woman in public. He does this regularly, and we'll hear another account next week where Jesus does this. That's a big no-no in the middle eastern culture of the day. But what makes this morning's account a fairly startling one, given the *very traditional* religious culture of the first century, was that Jesus allowed a woman, not only to talk with him, but to *touch* him. Now, the moment it happens Jesus didn't know who it was who touched him, but after

she confesses that it was her (with great fear and trembling I might add, which tells you something about how afraid women were to approach a man in public, especially a rabbi)—after she admits it, Jesus doesn't scold her, or rally the troops to stone her, or send her to the eternal time out corner. Instead, he *commends her* for her faith.

The other border crossing here, which goes along with the first one, is that this particular woman has a chronic illness which causes her to bleed. And under Jewish law this rendered her unclean—ritually and religiously unclean (and you can read all about this in Leviticus chapter 17 if you want all of the details; it's oddly specific about this type of situation). So, for her to come out *into public*—which Leviticus told her she should not do—and then to *touch* Jesus, would have rendered *him* ritually unclean too, under the law. And would have rendered her a criminal. It's bad enough that she talks to a male rabbi, and then touches him—she touches him with full knowledge that she is breaking the law, because of her condition. That's a serious violation!

And again, Jesus, once he hears her story and learns about her condition, doesn't condemn her, but heals her, because of her faith. So (quick review) there is a *cultural & social* border crossing here (a woman talking to a man in public)

and a *religious* border crossing (a woman with a hemorrhage touching another person, a rabbi no less). This is a doubly audacious violation of social codes for proper behavior, and, it's a violation of religious law. What was she thinking?? How dare she do this!

Yet, Jesus welcomes her boldness. Her courage. And he heals her. And, he restores her to community. There is a complete restoration here. How dare *he* respond to her like that!

Now, let's rewind for a moment and put ourselves in this woman's shoes so we can fully appreciate what has just taken place. And, perhaps, so we can see ourselves in her and find the courage, like her, to come to Jesus with our personal need for healing.

First, she had to have been a person of means, even some amount of wealth, having been able to spend a lot of money on all the doctors' attempts to cure her illness. This would have been quite expensive, and not everyone back then could afford even *one* doctor visit, let alone several. There was no health care insurance back then, no medicare for all, so she spent everything in an attempt to get better. So now, her financial resources are depleted; and to add

insult to injury, her health not only didn't improve, it got worse as Mark tells us. And she endured this for 12 years.

Think of the toll that would have taken on her, not just physically but mentally and emotionally. If you have had, or presently have, a chronic illness that doesn't get better, or gets worse, you know the mental and emotional burden of living with it over a long period of time. It's exhausting, and discouraging. And, especially these days... it's *expensive*. Even for those who have insurance.

Now add to that, second, the burden of being a person who is labelled as religiously and ritually unclean because of her illness. That would have excluded her from participating in any religious gathering or worship, and excluded her from interacting with other human beings in a social setting. Again, you can read Leviticus 17 if you want the full scoop. A person like her was required to be quarantined.

So, think of how that would have affected her spiritual life, and her view of God; and therefore, potentially, her view of herself: as less-than; as unworthy.

If someone here had a chronic illness today—say, cancer—we would welcome you here, we would pray for you, we would support you and rally

around you. But imagine if *our* religious rules and rituals were like theirs back then, and our belief was that a disease like cancer renders you unclean. If that was the case, we wouldn't welcome you; in fact, we would tell you to stay home until you were cured, and, we would tell you not to come into contact with us because you're unclean and if you touched us you'd make *us* unclean, and then *we'd* have to stay home. And, for good measure, you must have done something wrong to deserve your illness. God must be punishing you. That was also a prevailing belief about illnesses back then.

Anyway, good luck! See you when you get better.

So, imagine her isolation. Her loneliness. Her despair, because of the failed attempts by doctors, her worsening condition, and now the social isolation. She has become an untouchable. Like the Dalits in India—a lower class that is looked down upon and literally called the “untouchables” through their caste system.

Yet... now imagine *this*: through all of her despair and isolation, she dares to go out in public, and risks an encounter with Jesus, having only just heard about him. From her place of social isolation, this unnamed woman holds a vision that her life can be more than suffering. She refuses to be defined by her illness or by society's narrow views. Though cut off from human contact, support, and

care, she claims her birthright as a child of God who deserves healing. Even at great risk. Refusing to allow society to imprison her, she breaks the bars in a bold act of faith and self-affirmation. She steps forward to be healed and to claim her rightful place in the human community. It's remarkable. I wonder if I would have that kind of courage in that situation.

There is one other remarkable quality to note here about this unnamed woman, and a remarkable piece of the healing puzzle that Jesus completes, on top of her physical healing.

When she touches Jesus' clothes, he asks "Who touched me?" because he felt power go out of him. As a side note, I find this part of the encounter fascinating. To me it kind of sounds like something out of a comic book superhero story. Like she accidentally discovered Jesus' kryptonite. If we touch him, power goes out of him. Does that mean that if people *keep* touching him, will he be depleted of power and others gain power?

And besides, how could God-in-the-flesh not know who touched him? Isn't he omniscient? It's kind of a mystery, but it shows that Jesus was *not* omniscient, at least not in that moment; but he *was* spiritually aware and sensitive. Aware and sensitive, not only that something happened to *him*, but that someone *near*

to him had faith. He was aware that the power went forth from him because *someone with faith touched him*.

Anyway, he asks who touched me, and instead of shrinking back into the crowd and hiding, taking her healing home with her and saying “I’m good,” she comes forward and honestly admits that it was her. Think of the fear this must have struck in her when Jesus turned around and asked this. She who had no advocate but herself, no one to defend her, or help explain her situation to Jesus, must now gather even greater courage to take responsibility for what she has done. She didn’t know how Jesus would react. If anything, her expectation would’ve been that she was done for, based on the laws and expectations of the day.

Yet, she is willing to face the consequences. And so she speaks up, and her honesty is remarkable here, because admitting that she touched Jesus and that she was healed would’ve meant that she revealed her condition to everyone around her, exposing her to possible public shame and disgrace. So, this took great courage. There is a lesson here in honesty and vulnerability and courage.

And then comes Jesus’ brilliant and gracious response—because he knows what her courage and her honesty meant, first by coming to him and touching

him, and then *publicly admitting* that she was the one who touched him. Thus, outing herself and her disease.

And instead of publicly shaming her, Jesus does the exact opposite: he turns to her and calls her “daughter.” *Daughter*. In front of everyone. To us, this sounds like a term of endearment. A compassionate word from Jesus the healer, which it is. But to the Jewish ears of the day, including this woman’s ears, “daughter” would have had extra meaning. Because to call someone daughter or son was a way of saying, “You belong.” You are part of the community.

Remember the Zacchaeus story? When he climbs a tree because he wants to see Jesus, and Jesus calls him down, invites himself over to Zacchaeus’ house, and after their dinner Zacchaeus says he’s going to repay all the people he has defrauded? This slimy tax collector who had been disowned and hated by his own Jewish people for being a betrayer and extortionist? Well, after Zacchaeus’ promise of restitution Jesus says, “Today salvation has come to this house, for he, too is a son of Abraham.” By calling him “son,” in front of everyone, Jesus is restoring Zacchaeus to community—human community and religious community.

This is what Jesus does with this woman. By calling her daughter, he is saying to *her*, “You belong.” And he is saying to the community, “She belongs. Welcome her; embrace her. She is one of you.”

This word “daughter” also would have called to mind a text from the Old Testament, from the prophet Zephaniah, which Jim read for us. And I wonder if Jesus had this text in mind when he spoke to this woman and commended her for her faith, and called her daughter (this is Zeph 3:14-19).

As you heard, the passage begins with these words: “Sing aloud, O *daughter of Zion*; Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O *daughter of Jerusalem!* The Lord has taken away the judgments against you...” And the passage ends with these words: “The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save...he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. *And I will save the lame, and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise.*” This sounds a lot like what Jesus did, doesn't it?

Isn't that beautiful? As I've said before, when you are lying awake in bed at night, unable to sleep, and you hear music, it's God singing over you! Rejoicing over you. Taking away shame, giving grace, and creating an atmosphere of praise.

Daughters and sons of God, know this: the Lord is in our midst! Fear not!
Let God quiet you with love, and bring wholeness to you, in whatever way you
need it.

As we come to the Lord's table today, perhaps we can reflect on some
questions: what risks do you need to take to move toward Jesus in healing and
wholeness? How can you open yourself to him, and take courage to advocate for
yourself and your needs? What fears do you need to overcome in order to find
the fullness of life that God desires for you?

O Savior, in This Quiet Place