

BIBLE READING: Mark 5:21-43

SERMON

The story from the gospel of Mark deals indirectly at least, with an experience, which, I must confess, as a male preacher, at the very least embarrasses me to talk about and at most intimidates me.

For it is an experience peculiar to women and that most men don't even talk about, let alone think about.

But on the other hand, perhaps that itself is as good a reason as any for this male minister to preach on this passage. I could ignore all things I am uncomfortable with and take the safe route by generalising. I could preach about spiritual healing that Jesus makes possible; or the importance of faith; or the place of miracles themselves in the Gospel accounts.

But let's reflect on what is really going on here. We begin with the assumption that the Gospel writer Mark was male. The gospel that bears his name certainly is a 'man's' book. Up to this point in Mark's gospel, only two women have been mentioned, neither by name and both in terms of their relationship to males: -the mother-in-law of Simon and the mother of Jesus. But, by contrast, at least 34 men have appeared in the narrative, most of them named. In addition other groups of males are mentioned: ...scribes, Pharisees, Herodians, herdsmen, and so on.

So anyone reading the gospel of Mark for the first time will be somewhat surprised when running into this lengthy story within a story, both of which have females as the central characters.

Let's go to the beginning of the story.

An important man comes to Jesus with a request. The man's name is Jairus and we know he's important because he is described as a ruler of the synagogue; which means he is ranked among the religious elite of his community.

"My little daughter is very sick; she's dying," Jairus says.

"Come and lay your hands on her, so she'll get well."

Naturally, Jesus goes with him. We're not surprised

Maybe we're a little disappointed it isn't a more spectacular miracle similar to those already described in Mark's gospel, like Jesus calming the storm, or healing a man possessed by demons. For, by now we've come to expect Jesus to heal the sick.

So the story draws us in and we tag along after Jesus and notice that a big crowd is making the trip with us. Apparently word has spread that a VIP has asked Jesus for help. Up ahead we see Jesus turn around abruptly: he's talking to a woman - we can't hear what they're saying, but the people in front of us pass back the exchange.

We learn that what Jesus said when he turned around was, 'Who touched me?' His disciples think that it is quite funny- with all the people crowding around Jesus, pressing in on him, jostling him. But then they notice he isn't laughing.

And to their amazement they see a woman come out of the crowd and fall down in front of him, She tells her story publicly, and it leaves them with their mouths hanging open.

In order for us to understand why they were surprised, we need to give special attention to this woman. For she had a physical disorder which, as the Gospel describes it, resulted in her having 'a flow of blood for twelve years.'

So I need to call her what she was -the woman who never stopped menstruating. Now, I'm a man, and, besides being a little uncomfortable talking about this, I can't begin to imagine

what such a condition would be like. My body has never had to adjust to the rhythm of a monthly menstrual cycle. I've never experienced the effect it would have on my physical and emotional state - let alone comprehend the effects of living with such a condition on a daily basis for twelve years.

Only women can have some idea of what that would mean. Only they can begin to understand what's happening here; why this woman would have consulted one physician after another - why she didn't just get a second opinion; she got a third, a fourth, and who knows how many. Her suffering was physical, emotional, and financial - the text tells us she had spent all that she had. And despite all she did to get better her condition worsened. Mark puts it quite bluntly. He says it this way: she 'had suffered much under many physicians.'

According to the religious law of the day, anyone with a flow of blood was considered ritually unclean and had to keep away from others. Such a law found its roots in Leviticus 15:

- its very clear
- its very direct
- its in the book.

"If a woman has a flow of blood for several days outside of her monthly period or if her flow continues beyond her regular period, she remains unclean as long as the flow continues, just as she is during her monthly period. Any bed on which she lies and anything she touches during that time is unclean. Any one who touches them is unclean..." (Lev 15:25-27)
Her condition would have meant that she would have been cut off from human society, family life, and communal worship. Can we even begin to imagine her suffering?

She didn't dare ask Jesus to lay healing hands on her.

...'I can't do that,' she told herself. "He would be terribly offended to be asked to touch an unclean woman. But if I can just reach out and touch him myself when no one is looking--- he'll never even know. Maybe that will be enough."

And with the touch of his garment her flow of blood stops. And then her horror when Jesus suddenly turns and asks, 'Who touched me?'

In that moment that must have seemed like an eternity to her, she knew that he knew. And she falls down in the dust in front of him and tells him, "the whole truth"

There in front of the crowd she pours out everything...not out of fear.

The fear and trembling she felt was because she had been caught breaking a taboo, touching a man in her condition.

It wasn't fear that got her to tell the whole truth. It was something in Jesus' manner that convinced her she could tell him her story. Something about his refusal to condemn her, his willingness to listen, his acceptance of who she was and what she had done in breaking the taboo. And when at last she has told him everything, he gives this woman who has been ostracised, not rebuke, but blessing.

More is involved here than meets the eye. These are not simply two "happily-ever-after" stories. Both the woman who can't stop menstruating and the little girl who is cured at the end will eventually die, as the other people Jesus cures will die. The focus of the story is not the value of health but the more radical and costly affirmation of human acceptance that God embodies in Jesus.

Do we really believe that - that we find our greatest wholeness when we allow ourselves and others be "graced" by God's mercy.

There are many stories I could share about this – here is one about Taboos. A woman began coming to my church, and after a while she approached me with her story. She wanted me to know that she was uncomfortable in a church setting. It had taken her several

years to get up the nerve to come to church and then talk with someone representing the Church.

She used to be very active in her congregation in another place. She had taught S.S, she had been an active youth leader and she loved her church and she believed herself to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ.

She had become a good friend of the minister in her congregation. He valued what she had done, He had affirmed her in her work. She struggled for many years with being gay. She felt she could talk to her minister about this. He seemed to understand and so she felt some peace about her situation.

Some time later she received a phone call from her minister who sounded upset and who told her that the church elders had something to say to her.

They told her that she wasn't 'normal', and how she was a person who was sinful because she was in love with someone of the same sex. She had broken a taboo.

One by one they got on the phone and condemned her for bringing such a scandal upon their congregation. One elder spoke up and said that she would no longer remain on their membership role and that they were even removing her name from the baptismal register.

She told me how devastating it was to hear these leaders from her church telling her that she was going to hell.

I do not and I cannot know what it is like to be the recipient of such homophobia. Nor could I identify with her experience of total rejection and condemnation. Believing she had been placed outside the reach of God's love, she had been terrified at entering a church ever since that phone call. She had become almost totally convinced that the Gospel could no longer address her.

She told me and said she just wanted to know from my lips if she was still a child of God and an acceptable member of the community of faith. When she left she reached out and she touched me.

This is what Martin Luther must have meant when he said that we are all called' to be little Christs' to one another. And this is what Macrina Wiederkehr examines in her reflection on this gospel story when she writes:

"I love the memory of the woman with the flow of blood creeping up behind Jesus and touching the hem of his garment. The story goes that Jesus knew that she had touched him because power went out of him. He had blessed her, and he felt his blessing go forth. I would like to take the story a bit further and suggest that when the woman touched him he also felt energy coming in. He felt her blessing.

Can you imagine what it felt like after a hard week of ministry to find someone so believing that she was willing to touch just the hem of his garment? ...the woman left a part of herself with Jesus, and Jesus left a part of himself with her. I want to learn to bless like that." (A Tree Full of Angels: Seeing the Holy in the Ordinary)

...and can't we all? Amen