

“Your Faith Has Made You Well”

Prologue: When you hear today’s gospel lesson, you will experience a writing technique that is typical of Mark ... a technique known as “bracketing.” Bracketing is a means by which Mark tells a story while at the same time another story is told within the context of the original story. It almost seems that Mark has poor editing skills. Why not tell one story before moving on to another? And yet, the second story that intrudes into first has the effect of building one story upon another. The first story tells of the healing of the daughter of the ruler of the synagogue. It is the story about a prominent man who begs Jesus to come heal his daughter. On the way, Jesus is interrupted ... distracted ... by the woman who touches him ... seeking healing for herself.

Unlike the ruler of the synagogue, the woman is a “nobody.” She has no name. We are only introduced to her as a woman who has been hemorrhaging twelve years and has suffered under the care of many physicians. By interrupting one story with another, Mark expands the image of Jesus as a healer. Jesus is not just someone who turns to those who are prominent and powerful, like the ruler of the synagogue ... Jesus is also open to being touched ... interrupted ... by a woman who is an anonymous sufferer ... a person pushed to the margins of her society ... a powerless, unclean, social outcast that watches the world pass her by ... a world that ignores her because of her condition. Today’s Gospel lesson speaks both to our personal faith and to the faith of our church. You will find yourself in both stories ... because you are at the same time somebody and nobody!

(Read now the Gospel of Mark 5: 21-43)

Sometimes the most important things that happen to you in life are the intrusions. You are on your way somewhere with an agenda ... a clear, direct, purpose in mind ... and you get distracted. Something comes up that demands your attention, and often that “something else” turns out to be more important than the journey on which you originally began. As a minister, it happens to me all the time, which after many years of experience I’ve come to accept as a good thing! I have a daily schedule, appointments, specific tasks to do that often get interrupted because of a phone call that requests a certain need, or someone stops by the office asking for help, as Deanna can testify!

Today’s gospel lesson is a story about a woman who is an intrusion. In the first four verses of our lesson, Jesus is going about important business. Just before the woman intrudes, a leader of the synagogue, an important and impressive man, persuades Jesus to make a house call on his ailing daughter. Just after this woman’s intrusion, the story of the man at the synagogue is resumed and finished. On the way to do something very good for an important person and his daughter, Jesus becomes distracted. A woman appears. She intrudes from the margins. Of course, on the margins is where lots of men and women have been through most of history ... people on the margins ... living quietly. But this woman demands to be noticed. She intrudes into the story. We don’t know her name; nor do we know her family circumstances. All we know is that she is a person in great pain. For twelve years she has been hemorrhaging ... that is a lot of lost blood ... that’s a lot of life to lose.

Also, we learn that she has “endured much under many physicians.” In her frantic pursuit of well-being, she has spent her days in emergency rooms ... waiting ... waiting to be noticed. She has filled out those endless insurance forms. She has been poked at, tested, discussed, humiliated, lost her dignity, and still she suffers. Now she has nothing. Medicine has done all it could for her and to what end? She is financially and emotionally bankrupted! She is full of despair ... has little hope. So, at the end of her rope, she makes one last effort to live. She reaches out ... she pushes out from the margins to move toward the power that she senses is in this man from Nazareth.

Can you see her hand moving out to touch Jesus? This calls to my mind the picture by Michelangelo of the creation of Adam in the Sistine Chapel ... the picture of the Almighty God reaching out to touch the lifeless body of Adam to give him the spark of life. Here in our story for today the action is different. Here, the woman reaches out to Jesus. Her listless weak body, due to the loss of blood, finds the strength to reach towards Jesus ... to reach towards life! Perhaps, she has said to herself: “If I can only touch the hem of his garment, I will be well.”

This is one of the strongest images of faith I know of in the New Testament ... her hand reaching out from the margins of the crowd to where she had been pushed by her poverty, her pain, her gender... reaching out to touch Jesus ... the Lord ... the giver of life. And because she has reached out, she receives the life for which she had hoped. Immediately, she is healed. Then Jesus speaks. We can’t tell from the tone of his voice if he is upset with this intrusive woman or anxious because some power has left him, or compassionate towards this hurting person. Perhaps Jesus speaks because he wants to know who this person is with such faith that she demands a blessing. His disciples appear to have little concern to identify the woman. Jesus is different. He wants to know who she is. Perhaps this is one of the most healing moments in the whole story. This woman who was an unknown, identified only by her bleeding and her pain, is now going to be known, known by face, by name, known by Jesus!

Again, this woman takes matters into her own hand. She steps up and identifies herself. She trembles. After all, she has made a bold, decisive move, a move that all of her upbringing and her cultural norms tell her is inappropriate. She has pushed out from the margins where society has relegated her. She has pushed out toward Jesus. She has been told to be the passive recipient of whatever life there was, but she boldly chose to reach out and seized life for herself. From her painful situation, she touches the center of power. Will she be severely disciplined? Jesus speaks to her. He doesn't criticize or scold her. He doesn't address her as "patient" or "client" ... or just another social security number trapped in the health care system.

Tenderly he calls her "daughter." It is an intimate designation that honors her, that places her within the family, the family of God. Jesus praises her action. "Your faith has made you well." Note that Jesus doesn't even claim to have healed her. Rather, he gives her all the credit. She had faith that Jesus could heal her. Yet she also had faith in herself. She had refused to accept the relegated position to which society had assigned her. She was determined to be *someone* more than simply a person in pain and helplessness. She had faith in Jesus, but she also had faith in her own capacity to reach out and touch ... to receive the power. And so Jesus blesses her, "Go in peace" ... go in wholeness ... go to live life in its fullness. "Your faith has made you well." Her reaching out has been affirmed as Jesus reaches back toward her.

Then Mark returns to the first story, the story about the daughter of the leader of the synagogue. Life will also be given there, but we still can't help being more impressed with the life that is given to this once sad woman. This woman becomes a way of knowing who Jesus is. We have learned something about her, but she also, through her action, has revealed some important things about Jesus. Her story is our story, particularly when sickness has pushed us to the margins. When we are ill, sick in bed at home or in a hospital ... life goes on and passes us by. Everyone is going places and doing things --- everyone but us.

Another thing about sickness --- sickness is about losing control. Suddenly we are in the hands, like this woman, of "diverse physicians." We are no longer a person but a patient. We are forced to take off our clothes, to wear those odd hospital garments. We go through the indignity of having our bodies poked at and prodded. Needles are stuck in us and blood is drawn. We spend hours lying on a gurney waiting for a room, or waiting for the doctor to come and give us a test. Strangers come in and tell us to take this ... drink that. We have little or no control.

"Your faith has made you well." What is the faith that we are supposed to have that makes us well? In the face of the suffering in this world, we echo Jeremiah's plaintive question: "Is there no balm in Gilead?" The spiritual answers the question: "There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole." Today's gospel lesson is clear: there is a relationship between faith and healing. Faith approaches Jesus in hope and expectation. Faith is confident of blessing. Faith reaches out to touch Jesus. Faith implores Jesus to come and heal.

Faith also sustains those who suffer. Faith is a means of grace, even when a cure is not forthcoming. Remember the wisdom of the grieving women at the graveside in the movie *Steel Magnolias*: "That which does not kill us makes us stronger." Out of difficulty is potential for us to become bitter or better. Many become better ... by the grace of God. They grow stronger to offer more gifts to a wounded world. It is a great mystery of our faith that we best help others heal in the places where we have been wounded.

We give the hospital and pharmacies a lot of our money. The hospital gives us healing in exchange. Christians have a deeper understanding of healing than this. A central image for us is not only cure but care, not only wellness but wholeness. Wholeness is not simply having a body that is no longer diseased. Wholeness is also to be at peace with God and neighbor ... that all-embracing peace which means that we are at home in God.

The point of today's story is Jesus' power to heal and the woman's faith in that power to make her well. Wellness... wholeness ... faith are inseparable. So in whatever pain you suffer, however caught, the question is ... will you reach out to that power. Will you let the life God intends for you ... flow toward you? "Faith means being grasped by a power that is greater than we are ... a power that shakes us and turns us, and transforms and heals us." As Jesus said to the woman, he says also to you: "Daughter ... son ... your faith has made you whole ... go in peace ... and be free from that which makes you sick!"

Let us pray: Holy God, You are the Great Physician. Help us to see all healing as a gift of Your grace. Enable us to embrace health and life as Your precious gifts to us. Strengthen us in our patience and perseverance in times of sickness and great pain. Make us feel the pain and misfortune of others as keenly as we feel our own ... and teach us to keep them both in true perspective. Bless us this day with Your peace, O God ... a peace that makes us well ... a peace that makes us whole.