

*Who Touched Me?*  
Sermon 225 | Greystone Baptist Church | June 30, 2024  
Mark 5:21-43

Last week as Dr. Tony Cartledge finished his presentation on the conflict between Israel and Hamas, one of you summarized the situation with a phrase that I think characterizes so much of life in today's world: *It's complicated*. I won't name the person who said it because I didn't ask their permission but this is somebody with whom I've had several conversations about some important matters, so they know that this phrase is one of my favorites. You know, things are just so complicated these days.

And don't get me wrong, I hear you when you reflect on former days and say you remember when life and faith were more simple. When we all got our news from a common source and we could trust editors to do our fact checking for us. When Walter Cronkite or Dan Rather or Tom Brokaw would give us the news - just the facts - without personal opinion or hidden agenda to try and sway us in one political direction or another.  
and It isn't just the news!

I hear you when you share memories from church growing up, from the religion your parents taught you at home. When things - at least where faith was concerned - were black and white, clear as day, full of faith and not a shred of doubt. There was no questioning God or what the Bible meant. These were the days (for me at least) when the Bible had to stand on its own - without any consideration of the work of theologians or ethicists. Without the benefit of historical criticism, even without allowing the genre of each book to inform how it was read.

Things were simpler then, things were easier when we had  
one story,  
one interpretation,  
one application,  
and one formula for our faith.

Sometimes it's nice to remember that feeling. Because things were simpler then. And in that simplicity, we found comfort, stability, and security.

But friends, I have some news today:  
No matter how badly we long for the days gone by, we cannot turn back the hands of time, we know more now and if we're honest we could say we know better now. We have learned that there is always more than one story and we have also learned that everything - at least where human beings are involved - everything is complicated.

Today's Gospel lesson is no different. It is a complicated one. On the surface it looks like Jesus is up to the same ole tricks, performing miracles of healing as he travels

along with his disciples in tow. The characters are predictable as the crowds, the disciples, an outsider and an insider carry the plot from beginning to end. Two people need to be healed and guess what! Spoiler alert: Jesus delivers! It is simple - or so it seems.

But a closer reading reveals complexities that demand our attention. Jesus returns from his trip to the eastern shore of Galilee, the land of the Gentiles and his homecoming is met by the crowd which presses in on him from the moment his feet hit western ground. I can't help but imagine them like fans with front row seats at a Taylor Swift concert, stretching out their arms in hopes of touching her shoe, her jacket, the air that touched her... whatever they can get. That's how intense I imagine the crowd that surrounded Jesus to be.

But more than just wanting front row access to their favorite pop star, these crowds have something bigger in mind. Surely Jesus can feel the energy of the crowds. As they press on him the tension grows. This is not a passive crowd that will fade into the background. This is an active and anxious gathering of people who need something from their Jesus... they have come searching for healing, they have come hoping for a miracle. And some are more desperate for it than others.

Like Jairus, the synagogue official who meets Jesus from a place no parent ever wants to be. His daughter's life is on the line and he's grasping at straws. He will do anything for his daughter to be healed.

*When he saw him, he fell at his feet and begged Jesus repeatedly saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death..."*

So Jesus went with Jairus.

But on the way the crowd produces another desperate person. This time a woman who has been bleeding for 12 years. The fact that she is in the crowd at all shows us how desperate she is. Her malady would have rendered her ritually unclean and anyone she touched would be implicated. It wouldn't be egregious but they'd need a cleansing ritual in order to get themselves back in good standing.

She had tried more traditional means, visiting doctors and trying their medical interventions, but none of them worked. They just dried up all her money and left her body in worse condition than before. She needed a miracle and she was ready to do whatever it took to be healed. So she touched Jesus' cloak.

Two desperate souls nearing the end of their rope falling down and begging, reaching out and touching... and both received the miracle they were searching for. But that's not all.

Mark gives us other details, other clues that give away his more complicated motives. We know that Jairus, who falls at Jesus' feet, is a leader in the synagogue. This position places him higher on the social ladder than the others we may find in the crowds. Jairus

is also named, which matters in the ancient world and matters as we read the stories. He has agency and worth; and he has a great need.

We wonder, as we read:

Did Jairus risk something in his social position to approach Jesus in hopes of healing? Did he have to lower himself in other ways - beyond just the physical ways in which he fell to the ground - Did he have to take off some of the status and privilege that he and his family enjoyed in order to find the healing that he needed most of all?

And the woman who, in contrast to Jairus, has no name in the text, indicating she had no status, no position, no agency of her own to stand on. Yet she comes rushing toward Jesus, upheld and propelled by her own two feet; and as she stands, she reaches out (all opposite physical motions to the ones taken by Jairus) and she claims for herself the healing that is needed.

It seems preposterous and presumptuous, the way she just takes it without asking. Even Jesus cannot tell who it is that has touched him - understandable given the size of the crowd - but the healing happens nonetheless.

Both she and Jesus can feel it, as if they are connected by more than the hand and the momentary grab. The woman took a risk just like Jairus, but hers was not one of self-lowering, she was low enough already. Hers was one of self-empowerment. Her risk was claiming the healing that she *knew* Jesus would give her. She knew it so much that she didn't even ask, she just claimed it for herself and in so doing, she was healed. In body, and I bet in spirit, too.

Two stories, two characters, two people, two human beings willing to accept great risk, willing to lay it all on the line in order to find healing. One by getting low, and another by raising up.

There is yet another strange connection between the unnamed woman and Jairus' daughter. This one is even more subtle, unless you know what to look for. Did you catch it in the reading? It's the number 12. Which is no insignificant number!

12 is the number of tribes that complete the people of Israel.

12 is the number of disciples that Jesus calls along the sea.

12 is the number of years Jairus' daughter has been alive; and

12 is the number of years the hemorrhaging woman has suffered.

12 is the number of completion and wholeness in the stories of our Bibles. And so when we see the connection here, we cannot simply look past it. We know that it is a thread that connects the two suffering women together, centralizing their individual healings and making us ask what they have to do with the whole.

From Jairus' daughter to the bleeding woman, their status spans the breadth of society, just as their years mark the whole of the community. Perhaps this is why Mark felt that

their healing stories needed to be told not as two separate miracles but as one critically intertwined with the other.

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In her book *Searching for Sunday*, Rachel Held Evans writes about a forest in Fishlake National Forest, Utah. Well, it isn't just a forest, it is actually a section of forest that is made of one of the biggest and oldest living organisms in the world. Estimated to be around 80 thousand years old, spanning approximately 106 acres, and containing over 47,000 stems, Pando aka the Trembling Giant, looks like a collection of aspen trees at first glance. But upon further study, scientists have discovered that it is one single organism, with each stem possessing identical genetic markers. And they are all nourished by one, interconnected root system. "What looks like a forest, is in a sense, a single tree." (RHE quoting Rachel Sussman, chapter 25)

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We are in a pattern of assuming that we are like single trees that make up a global forest.

We are in the pattern of believing that we each have individual needs. That we each have struggles and ailments, challenges and setbacks, things for which we need attention and resources.

But maybe, beneath the surface, just beyond the scope of our limited understanding, God is trying to teach us that what we thought was a community of individuals is really one giant organism. Interconnected lives, with unique expressions of one human DNA. Maybe, by insisting that these two stories are told together as one, Mark is helping us to see that things are not so simple as my needs competing with your needs; my healing journey separate from yours.

Maybe Mark is like Lilly Watson, who said to the UN in 1985:

"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

This statement, of course, so profound that it has since served as the motto for many groups around the world. But Watson won't take credit for it, because more than a decade before voicing these bold words at the UN, she had been a part of an Aboriginal Rights group in Queensland, Australia, where she's from; and the group came up with the phrase. So she is not comfortable receiving the credit as if she were the sole author. "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let's work together."

What if liberation and healing are just two sides of the same coin?

Two of the notes obscured by the full harmony of God's inexhaustible love?

What if God's story of healing is so much bigger than just the parts that we have come to know in our own bodies, in our own experiences, in our own understanding?

Then maybe we can cling to faith when things don't make sense, don't go our way, or seem more complicated than we would like to admit. Maybe we could join our voices with Paul's when he says: For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

And if we can start to see the world, all of God's creation, as unique parts of God's largest organism, Each one with a important and necessary story, threads woven together in pursuit of healing. Then we might begin to see the difference between unity and uniformity.

Then we might be able to make space for complexity as we incorporate the stories of others into our own (like Jairus who had to deal with his own worry and fear and insecurity in order to make room for the woman to be healed) Then we might begin to understand that the liberation and healing that our whole world seems to be crying out and groaning for, is all wrapped up in understanding that we are all connected.

There is no resurrection for Jairus' daughter without the healing of the hemorrhaging woman.

They both matter. They are both connected. Their stories must be told together. It is incredibly complicated. But then again, it is also quite simple.

As the poet Alla Renee Bozarth says:

*There is no difference between  
healing your body and healing the earth  
or helping another to heal.*

*It is all the same body.*

"What looks like a forest, is in a sense, a single tree."