

**June 30, 2024**  
"Healing Faith"  
Mark 5:21-43  
Rev. John Pritchard

It's always great to be with you, and this time I get two weeks in a row—my cup runneth over! I have to acknowledge, too, that it's a different church, a different denomination, that the last time we were together. I have to say, thanks be to God, that the Spirit continues to blow toward justice.

There is so much in the Gospel reading today, these two stories sandwiched together so that one begins and then is interrupted by the telling of the other, after which the first resumes and continues to its finish—a bit like a sandwich, with bread and filling and then bread again. Mark's gospel, especially, does that in several places to signal that two stories interpret each other, that they are about the same thing and reinforce each other. So it is no surprise that a story about a woman with a blood flow for twelve years should interrupt a story about a girl who reaches her twelfth year and dies. That's a story about a girl becoming a woman, reaching the age of her blood flow, which in a traditional patriarchal culture was the age at which she could be married off, the age at which she became convertible property, capable of being exchanged by her father for dowry from another man. It's a story of how deadly that is, and how Jesus calls her to life, how life-giving is the community of Jesus that welcomes women on their own, not as property of men, with their own strength and value.

It's a rich sandwich, but I'm not going to pursue that because I was struck most this time as I read by one of those two stories, by the woman with the blood flow, and I was struck by how I was never taught to hear the story when I was growing up. Every time I was taught the story, I was given this key to understanding it: see how great Jesus is, how powerful. He can even heal when he's not aware of it, when he's not paying attention to it. Just to touch him, just to approach him, is enough. See how great he is—he makes her well!

Except, that's not what the story says, not what Jesus in the story says. "Your faith has made you well," he tells the woman. HER faith is what does it, is what has the power ... her FAITH, but what, what in the story is her faith?

Perhaps, perhaps, her faith is simply her strength to put one foot in front of the other, to keep going, with all she has to carry, to keep trying with all that weighs on her. Father Gregory Boyle, parish priest in the projects of Los Angeles, working with gang members there, says that our call is to be compassionate, to be in the world who God is, and he describes that this way: to "stand in awe at what the poor have to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it," meaning, to notice all they have to carry so we see the strength they have in carrying it. Perhaps, when you see all this woman has to carry, perhaps her faith is simply that, carrying it, the strength she has to do so.

Remember, she has been sick for twelve years, physically sick with all the attendant fears that go with that. What does it take to carry that, not to mention

that she has seen doctor after doctor, spent every last blessed cent on healthcare, and nothing has helped a whit? Penniless, discouraged, and still sick—what does it take to carry that? What strength to still put one foot in front on the other, for twelve years!

And the burden is even heavier. Her flow of blood made her unclean, according to scripture, unfit for contact. To be in her presence, to touch her, to touch even the things she touched would contaminate one, make one unclean as well requiring ritual cleansing before human contact. So for twelve years, she was literally unwanted, unworthy of contact with others; she'd had to stay in the closet, hide who she was, to be among others, and still, she put one foot in front of the other; she kept on, even when she would be told again and again that even God turned from the unclean. Even God!

What strength to keep going, physically challenged, living in fear, alone, rejected even by God! What strength to keep going... and still to hope. What incredible strength!

Someone shared with me recently the story of a person they'd had contact with, a mother abused by her husband to the point of brain damage, who moved to a new city with her daughter for safety, having to start over, plagued by physical trouble, working long hours, and explaining she had to do it all for her daughter. The person sharing the story simply said, "I'm humbled and amazed by her strength, her commitment to her child."

How many folks around us should we be amazed at, carrying so much and still putting one foot in front of the other? How much of our own strength do we overlook? We limp, we ache, we feel the burden, but do we recognize our own strength, that we continue to carry it all, that we go on ...

Like that woman, twelve years of going on. Could her strength to keep going be the faith Jesus applauds? Or could it be her confidence—in God, in herself—the confidence that she is not supposed to be so burdened, to be broken, that she is not meant to be left out, the confidence that she should be whole, that she deserves more, and the readiness to reach for it, to reach for Jesus, to be in a crowd surrounding him, despite the risk that others will find her out, to reach to touch his cloak, despite the risk that this may simply be one more disappointment, to claim the wholeness she knows she is made for, despite the risk that everyone else may be right—“unclean,” they say of her. Could her confidence be her faith?

When I was a child, every summer my family vacationed in Seaside Heights, NJ, which is contiguous to and shares a boardwalk with Seaside Park. Some of you may remember that boardwalk; when Hurricane Sandy plowed up the East coast, it destroyed part of that boardwalk and images of boardwalk and a roller coaster on it plummeting into the ocean filled the news for weeks. Well, on that boardwalk, right next to where that roller coaster stood when I was a kid was a marvelous old-fashioned carousel, and halfway through each ride, an

attendant would lower a wooden arm filled with brass rings and one gold one. If those sitting on the outer ring of horses, which went up and down, if those sitting on them stretched real far and reached as they went by that arm, they had a chance to grasp a ring, and one person, one person, could get the gold ring, which could be exchanged for a prize, a big stuffed animal or some such thing. When I was little, I never sat on the outside, because I knew I was too small to reach, but even as I grew tall enough in body, I still sat on the inside horses. "I'll never reach it," I'd say to myself. "I can't stretch that far," I'd say to myself. "I don't deserve it," I'd feel to myself; "I'm not good enough." I was tall in body, but not in spirit.

But that woman, that woman in the gospel, is tall in spirit. She reaches for the ring. She has no doubt of the goodness of God in her. She has no doubt that she wants and deserves the health she reaches for. She has no doubt that she is made to be well.

Do we share her confidence? Can we name and reach for the wholeness we crave? Do we know, can we claim, that we are made for it, that we deserve it, that God's goodness is in us? Do we recognize the same in those around us?

That woman is tall in spirit, and perhaps her confidence is the faith that Jesus applauds, or perhaps it's simply her courage. Once she touches Jesus, the story says, he turns around, aware that power has gone out from him, and demands to know who touched him, and the story says that she, with fear and trembling,

comes forward and tells him the whole truth. Not knowing what would happen, not knowing what anger or rejection will greet her, she tells her story. Not knowing how Jesus will react to her touch which made him now unclean, not knowing what wrath he will unleash, still she tells her story. She could have slipped into the crowd, savoring this benefit all for herself. She could have “spun” her story, sanitizing it, simply saying she was ill without naming what that illness was, staying still in the closet, softening the blow. But instead, she tells her story. What courage does that take, and could that be her faith, the courage to embrace who she is and to share it?

The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous contains the promise not to “regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it,” and continues with this promise: “No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others.” Do you hear that? It’s the courage not to turn from one’s story, the courage to own one’s story, one’s life, to share one’s story because in that story is a gift for someone. It’s the courage to be who we are, to speak what we have to speak, because that is the gift we have to give.

Could it be her courage that Jesus calls the woman’s “faith,” and do we have such courage—to embrace who we are, our faults and failures and needs as well as our strengths; to trust that in who we are, in our stories, is a gift; to risk sharing that gift? Do we have such “faith”? Can we recognize and honor it in those around us?

Whatever that woman's faith—whether her strength to continue with all she had to carry, or her confidence to reach for the ring, for wholeness, or her courage to embrace her story as a gift for others—whatever her faith, Jesus says *it* made her well. *It* made her well. It freed her from a life confined to fear, from the isolation of the closet, from the shame of having nothing to offer. It made her well.

So I pray that we may find such faith—that we may recognize and stand in awe of our strength, the strength we live in every day; that we may claim the goodness of who we are, the wholeness we deserve; that we may embrace who we are and offer ourselves, our stories, as gifts. May we find the faith that heals us.