

Making Better Choices in Tough Times

February 2, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages – Mark 5:24b-34 (NRSV)

And a large crowd followed him [Jesus] and pressed in on him. ²⁵Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. ²⁶She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. ²⁷She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” ²⁹Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. ³⁰Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” ³¹And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’ ” ³²He looked all around to see who had done it. ³³But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. ³⁴He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

Suffering

Sooner or later, we are all personally confronted by suffering. Our suffering might stem from illness or divorce or loss of a job or the death of a loved one – difficult times come at us from many directions. Suffering, in all its forms, forces us to confront the fact that the world, and our lives in it, are not as they should be. All the brokenness, pain, and strife force us to confront our most foundational beliefs about God and about ourselves. In the midst of difficulty and suffering, do we turn to God or do we turn from God? Such choices are made all the more difficult because pain and hurt and shock often throw us into mental and emotional disarray that can make it hard to think straight or look more than a step or two ahead.

In today’s scripture passage, we meet a woman who has been sick and shunned for twelve years. Mark tells us of the choice she made.

A Woman Suffers

Jesus has returned to the west side of the Sea of Galilee. There, he begins to teach but is interrupted by a man named Jairus, an administrator of some sort in the local synagogue, who asks Jesus to come see his dying daughter.¹ While Jesus is making his way to Jairus’ home, a large crowd presses in on this miracle worker. In the crowd, there is a woman who has suffered from female hemorrhaging for twelve years! She’d been to all the doctors, such as they were in her day, and had spent all her money. She’d exhausted her medical alternatives but to no avail. No matter what she did, she got worse, not better. For twelve years this had gone on!

As difficult and worrisome as her illness must have been, the nature of her illness rendered her a social outcast. According to Jewish law as set forth by God (see Leviticus 15:25-30), a woman was “unclean” during any time of female hemorrhaging. For most

Who Wrote the Gospel of Mark?

Many people don’t realize that all four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – were written anonymously. None of them bear the author’s name. The names these Gospels bear come to us from the early church, in the first few centuries after Jesus’ resurrection. The early church believed that the writer of Mark’s Gospel was a companion of Peter who got most of his material from Peter’s preaching and eyewitness accounts. Many early Christians further believed that Mark, the author, was also John Mark in Acts (see Acts 12:2, 25; 15:37-39).

Regardless of who wrote Mark, we, as part of the Christian community, affirm that Mark’s Gospel and the rest of the Bible are inspired by God in a way unlike any other writings. We proclaim that all the authors were “illuminated by the Holy Spirit” and bear true witness to God and God’s work.

¹ The story of the hemorrhaging woman is set in the middle of a larger story about Jesus’ raising to life of Jairus’ ill daughter. See the text box on the next page for more on this.

women, this was only several days each month, but for the woman in the crowd, her bleeding meant that she had been unclean for twelve years. Any Jew who touched her, or her bed, or anything she sat on would become unclean also; thus, for twelve years this woman had not experienced the slightest touch of another person. It is pretty hard even to imagine what her life must have been like. Little wonder that she went in search of this miracle worker.

A Woman Chooses

Because the woman was ritualistically unclean and untouchable, you can almost picture some people in the crowd struggling to avoid her touch as she surges toward Jesus. Coming up from behind, she touches Jesus' clothing, believing, as did her contemporaries, that Jesus' power would be carried even in his clothing. Though the woman believed that by touching Jesus' clothing she would be healed, in what must have been a moment of overwhelming joy, she is healed instantly and feels the overwhelming power of that healing. Jesus too feels the power of the healing, but he is not sure who touched him. He asks his disciples who touched him, but they respond sensibly enough (but with a little exasperation) that it is impossible to know because there are so many people in the crowd. Now, we come to the most amazing part of this story.

This ill and shunned woman, who had found the courage to come to a crowd of people in the first place, and then had been bold enough to touch the miracle-working teacher, now finds the strength to come forward, in all her fear and trembling, to confess that it had been she. Frankly, it boggles the mind. You and I probably have little appreciation of what it must have taken for her to come that day in her uncleanness and risk even worse ostracism. But Jesus understood. When she confesses what she has done (made Jesus ritualistically unclean by touching him), he tells her that her faith has made her well and that she can "go in peace" and be healed of her affliction. The "peace" with which Jesus blesses her is far more than relief from anxiety or fear. This peace is what God wills, not merely for the body or the soul or for the human race, but for his whole creation.² This peace is wholeness and salvation. There is a

A Story within a Story

At several points in his Gospel, Mark inserts one story into another. The story of the sick woman who touches Jesus' garments is in the middle of a larger story that begins at Mark 5:21.

Jesus has crossed back over the Sea of Galilee. Jairus, an important administrator in the local synagogue, has come pleading that Jesus accompany him to see his dying daughter. The sick woman approaches Jesus while he makes his way to Jairus' home. Before reaching the home, Jesus is told that there is no point in going further for the girl is dead. Jesus replies, "Do not fear, only believe." At Jairus' home, people are weeping over the child's death. In contrast to the faith of the hemorrhaging woman, these people scoff at Jesus when he suggests that the girl is not dead, but sleeping. Indeed, Mark tells us that they laughed at Jesus! However, Jesus went in to see the girl and told her to "get up." The twelve-year old immediately got up, walked around, and ate. These stories make us consider the nature of true faith.

spiritual dimension to Jesus' healing of this woman. Not only did her bleeding stop, but she was made clean, able to touch and be touched. Her steadfast faith in the power of Jesus enabled her to begin rebuilding right relationships with her neighbors and loved ones.

Choosing God

The woman had suffered for a very long time. It wouldn't surprise us if she had become bitter and alienated from God. In the midst of suffering, many people do begin to doubt God's love or God's goodness or even God's existence. But this woman did not embrace anger or doubt. She turned *to* God, not *from* God. Some might say that her choice was made out of nothing more than blind desperation. Jesus knew otherwise. He saw that her choice to turn to him had been made out of faith alone. Her act of faith resulted in a physical and spiritual healing that went to the center of her being.

God doesn't promise us a physical healing in response to our faith, but he does promise us that he will never abandon us and that, even in the midst of the most profound suffering, we can find wholeness and peace in God's love - if only we will choose to turn *to* him, not *from* him.

²Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W. (1995, c1985). *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*. The word translated "peace" is *eirene* in the Greek and corresponds to *shalom* in Hebrew.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Mark 5:21-43 The larger stories of Jairus' daughter and the hemorrhaging woman</p>	<p>Day 2 Matthew 9:18-26 Matthew's telling of these stories.</p>
<p>Day 3 Luke 8:40-56 Luke's telling of the stories; How do these versions differ?</p>	<p>Day 4 Leviticus 15 Male and female uncleanness in the Old Testament law.</p>
<p>Day 5 Romans 8:35-39 Nothing - no suffering or hardship ~ can separate us from God's love!</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. It isn't hard to understand how suffering might drive a person *from* God. Life can seem so far removed from God's goodness. We ask, "How could God be all-good and all-powerful and there be such suffering?!" Yet, as Christians we make a most remarkable claim. Yes, we suffer, but God knows our suffering first-hand. Jesus on the cross has to mean that God suffers with us! How might this perspective help us come to grips with pain and suffering? Do you find it comforting to put your faith in a God-who-suffers?
2. Life's trials can turn us into pretty poor decision-makers. The traumas of illness or divorce can make it very difficult for us to find our way forward. How can we help others make better choices in difficult times? Is this something we ought to try to do - or just stay out of? Discuss the delicate balance between offering help and offering too much help. How can we go about building Christian relationships that can help us when we get into trouble or difficulty - when *we* are the ones at risk of making bad choices?
3. The hemorrhaging woman was a social outcast. We don't usually think of ourselves as living in a culture where ill people are shunned and made into outcasts. Yet, I wonder if this is really so. AIDS has often been a disease whose victims were cast out of "proper society." Are there other diseases that turn its victims into social outcasts? Is it a simple matter of being afraid of "catching" the illness or is something more at work? Discuss the ways in which ostracism would make any illness more difficult to bear.