

Healing Touches
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Scriptures:

Mark 5:21--43 (NRSVA)

²¹When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. ²²Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet ²³and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live."
²⁴So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him 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."

³⁵While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" ³⁶But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." ³⁷He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. ³⁸When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. ³⁹When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." ⁴⁰And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. ⁴¹He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" ⁴²And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. ⁴³He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Sermon:

We tend to read or hear the stories in our text today as just miraculous biological cures as testimonies to Jesus' supernatural abilities. However, the ancients would not have held our understandings of sickness, disease, the natural, or supernatural.

As we know, all authors must make certain assumptions about their readers when writing. Therefore, the gospel authors assumed their audiences' to be knowledgeable Jews, Jewish Jesus-believers, and Ancient Near Easterners in general. Also, many of the NT authors may not have had firsthand knowledge of the folk-ways and practices of Jesus and his audiences. They would have relied on what they had been told or made to understand just like we must.

I believe the author of Mark was writing in Rome shortly after the brutal suppression of the Jewish rebellion and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans. As such, Mark is

dealing with a whole new set of issues concerning who Jesus was and is as the Messiah that the Apostle Paul did not have to deal with. Paul is our first NT writer. I say this because the Temple and Jerusalem were critical to Jewish Messianic expectations and the coming kingdom of God. Also, Mark is careful to downplay any hint of seditious aspirations in connection with Jesus or his followers all the while extolling and expecting God's kingdom to come soon. Mark, like Jesus, believed he was living in the end times.

At this point, Jesus-believers could be classified as a sect within Judaism. "A sect is a small, organized group that separates itself from a larger religious body and asserts that it alone embodies the ideas of the larger group because it alone understands God's will."¹ Sects and their members are generally out-groups and see themselves as surrogate families.

Chapter 5 in Mark's Gospel deals with Jesus meeting folks who would have been classified in the Pharisaical traditions as impure and were to be shunned or avoided. The sources of the rabbis and their emerging Judaism were drawn from the ranks of the Pharisees. Jesus' first encounter was with the Gerasene demoniac; the second, a woman with an issue of blood, and finally, a deceased young woman. Each story concludes with a common theme. So, let's ask what these two women would have meant to the writer and his first audience in a Jewish Jesus-believing community in Rome - a community that was anticipating Jesus' return any day, and his bringing the kingdom of God.

Although the president of the synagogue's daughter was 12, a child by our standards, she would have been a young woman of marital age in those days. Both of these women in their respective states represented two universal forms of person-contamination in antiquity and even in parts of the modern world - menstruation and corpse defilement.

However, given our western cultural snobbery and western Christianity's anti-Jewish biases, we have been led to believe that these women's conditions and associated restrictions were far worse than they really were. I think we must remember that Mark, a Hellenized Jew, living in Rome, fifty to fifty-five years after the events (possibly not even alive at the time of the events) is making his case for Jesus as the Messiah in opposition to what he and others may have understood about Judaism in the holy lands of an earlier period. Throw into this mix an emerging, rabbinical Judaism that was trying itself out, obviously in conflict with the author and his sect of Jesus-believers, and you began to get a picture sectarian confusion.

Therefore, I think Mark in typical rabbinical fashion, as did Jesus, exaggerated certain things to make his points or he had only hearsay sources of information about certain customs, beliefs, and places. To this I must add, many of the purity codes and rituals were not practiced among Jews living in the Diaspora, places like Rome, long before some of them were abandoned by rabbinic Judaism after the fall of the Second Temple. Also, note there is a rejection of the healing arts and doctors of the day, normally available only to the elites, in favor of Jesus, a folk-healer, for reasons that shall become clear.

The president of a local synagogue approaches Jesus in a humiliating display of honor subordination, begging him to come and attend his sick daughter. While en route Jesus has an encounter with a woman who has suffered a gynecological condition for twelve years. Not only would her condition have been painful and unpleasant, but according to Jewish statues in Leviticus 15, and specifically her condition mentioned in verses 25-30, anything or anyone she touched would have been ritually unclean, to be shunned or avoided for specified periods.

¹ Cohen, Shaye J. D. From the Maccabees to the Mishnah, 3rd edition. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 2014, p.124.

I point out that in the first part of Leviticus 15 there are analogous prohibitions concerning men and some of their bodily issues. Naturally, such people and their mysterious and unexplainable abnormalities must be avoided, controlled, or in extreme cases eliminated in the interests of society. The Jewish laws and statutes governing things deemed not normal or polluting find their source in the idea of God's holiness in Leviticus 19:1-2; wherein, God's people are told to be holy as God is holy, which the Israelites took to mean they were to be separated from others and things profane and things classified as not normal.

I think we may surmise that since this woman had financial resources of her own, which she had exhausted on doctors, she could have been a widow or a divorcee. As a divorcee, an amount specified in her marriage contract (Ketubah) would have been given or returned to her if the marriage was terminated for lawful reasons. There would have been some questions about the lawfulness of divorcing such women in some schools of Jewish thought at the time of Jesus. Remember, the author doesn't tell us certain things because he assumes his audience as Jews, Jewish Jesus-believers, and Ancient Near Easterners knew what was going on here and the point he is trying to make in opposition to his antagonist and their issues with Jesus and his community, which is the reason he is writing in the first place.

Regardless, this woman would have had been excluded from much in life as well as being physically miserable. In her state, as I said, she was not supposed to touch or be touched by those considered clean. Usually the person having contact with such women or men were considered unclean and avoided until night fall or in some cases for seven days. (I invite you to check out the text.)

Now broke and withdrawn from family and friends to a certain degree, in a last-ditch effort, the woman decides to seek out this itinerant folk-healer, whom she has heard about through the gossip network. In some traditions, ideally women in her condition were not allowed to go out in public and were sequestered. Yet, more realistically this would not have been the case. This woman as a rule would not have been touched or the things she touched handled by others.

In my opinion, given that she may have been a member of the elite, she and her condition would not have been known to Jesus' crowd. Anyway, she unobtrusively merges with the crowd that is intensely focused on Jesus. I think Mark wants to show that this woman's desire for healing was a desperate act of selfishness. In her attempt to sneak healing; in a time before more sophisticated physiological understandings, Mark may have in mind the idea of showing this woman as exposing everyone in the crowd to pollution danger. If successful in touching Jesus' garment, according to tradition, she would have contaminated him making him unclean, and if Jesus were a highly observant Jew, he would have been seriously restricted and should withdraw from the crowd for the remainder of the day.

When this woman touched the fabric of Jesus' cloak with her faith-filled intentions, she felt herself cured of her hemorrhage, and Jesus felt curative power drawn from him. He at once turned and confronted the crowd. He looked about searching for eye contact or avoidance thereof with the person who had touched him with faith-filled purposes.

Why didn't Jesus let it be? Why did he think it necessary to call attention to the poor woman, hadn't she suffered enough for long enough, why humiliate her? Why didn't he just privately rejoice in her cure and go on? If we do not get distracted by our ideas of a supernatural cure, I think we will see something wondrous and amazing.

Jesus said to the woman so that the crowd of followers, ancient and modern, could hear and understand not only the curative power of a person's faith and God's desire to make people whole, but an even greater, healing dimension. Let us note the three phases: "*Daughter, your*

faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” (The more accurate translation would be healed of your scourge or affliction)

Please note, Jesus addresses her affectionately as if she were a family member.

We learn that the woman’s faith had already cured her physically, which appears to have been known only to her, the author, and the reader. I wonder if Jesus knew when the power left him what it was curing. You think he may have suspected something female afoot when she finally caught his eye?

However, this woman is publicly instructed to go in peace; that is, don’t worry anymore, be happy. Now, catch this: Jesus tells her after she knows, and he knows that she is cured of her biological condition, to be healed of her affliction. Hummm. Jesus announces for all to hear that she was also healed of her social alienation and existential aspects connected to her previous condition. She is free to rejoin family, friends, and community.

Malina and Rohrbaugh in the Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels give us great insight into what is going on here, when they say:

In our world, we view disease as a malfunction of the organism which can be remedied, assuming cause and cure are known, by proper biomedical treatment. We focus on restoring a sick person's ability to function. Yet often overlooked is the fact that health and sickness are always culturally defined and that in the ancient Mediterranean, one's state of being was more important than one's ability to act or function. The healers in that ancient world thus focused on restoring a person to a valued state of being rather than an ability to function. Because people in antiquity paid little attention to impersonal cause-effect relationships and therefore paid little attention to the biomedical aspects of disease, healers focused on persons in their social settings rather than on organs and their biotechnical functions.

Thus, we see this woman not only physically cured but socially and existentially healed.

We hear this woman’s curative faith reiterated in a negative way in verse 36, as Jesus overhears that Jairus’ daughter has died and it is no longer necessary to trouble Jesus.

³⁶ *But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe."*

Jairus also has life-saving faith because his daughter regains life and the pall of corpse contamination and the despair and hopelessness of death are lifted from this family and the community. Jesus instructs the father and mother to be quiet about this event, which he frequently does in Mark’s Gospel to downplay his true nature, which never works, it just increases his following and people’s expectations of him.

Next Jesus tells the parents to give the young woman food. This simple act of eating not only gives her much needed nourishment after a serious, death-dealing illness, but signals that she and they are no longer contaminated by death. She is reinstated in the family and the family within the community. All of them are made normal again.

In the back of the minds of Jesus’ and Mark’s audiences would have been a nagging question about who had sinned or what sin had caused the woman’s hemorrhage, the young woman’s illness and eventual death, or the Gerasene demoniac's possession. But, with Jesus’ touch and words, there came not only physical cures but an existential healing - the forgiveness of sin and divine and social restoration. All Jesus asked was, “Do not fear; only believe.”

I don't think Jesus' first audience would have been as impressed with him curing the woman with the issue of blood or reviving the young woman as we are. Nor, might I add would Mark's audiences. Several of Israel's prophets had done similar things and even greater - look at Moses and the Red Sea and Elijah reviving the widow of Zarephath's son. What they would have found highly unusual, and I think one of Mark's major points in the face of his community's rabbinical harassment, was that Jesus, a holy man, a son of God, has associated with and cured the Gerasene demoniac, he has been touched by a woman with an issue of blood, and has not only entered the house of the dead but touched the dead and did nothing, absolutely nothing about his states of impurity.

By all rights, Jesus should have at least been unclean until nightfall and avoided others. He should have undergone an extensive and well-defined process of purification lasting seven days as outlined in Numbers 19 for entering the home or touching a dead person. We have no evidence or mention that he did any of this. Jesus doesn't seem to give two cents about such things.

As we read in the opening verses of Mark 6, Jesus simply leaves the president of the synagogue's home, goes to his own home, and on the Sabbath enters a synagogue and teaches. As a Jew, even some Jewish Jesus-believers, you've got some questions, such as, what is going on here with this so-called Jewish Messiah and the purity statutes?

As modern people, we often sell the gospels short by becoming so preoccupied with what we call the miraculous or the supernatural that we miss the practical everyday wonders at work in our text. Mark understands Jesus having taught that people are not to be excluded or subordinated in his Jesus-family because of gender, social, or religious status.

Let me tell you something amazing my friends; this is a reality we have come to know and feel in the depths of our being not through well-reasoned theologies, Christologies, or advanced physiology, but from the mysterious and wondrous touch of the Holy Spirit, a touch that affirms the Good News of God's loving acceptance in Jesus the Christ, not for just these two women or the demoniac, but for all who call upon God for wholeness in Jesus' name across the ages

What then is our text telling Mark's Jewish Jesus believing family in Rome? I think he is saying that in the expediency of the end days, ancient religious purity codes are not worth a hill of beans in his Jesus family. And, the common theme in all three stories is that each person is cured to be restored to family, friends, community, and God - to belong - no longer alienated.

Therefore, Jesus' ability to pronounce God's forgiveness in word or deed and to restore a person's relationship to God, to families, and communities are the real wondrous and amazing things he did. And, besides what good is a cure when you are alone, isolated, and on the outside looking in?

Where there was and is spiritual and existential hopelessness and despair, Jesus gives hope and forgiveness. Where there was and is pain and death, he gives wholeness and life. Where there was and is fear and suspicion, he gives the comfort and confidence of togetherness. Where there was or is hellish loneliness and a damning sense of worthlessness, he gives acceptance and welcome into a holy family, now and forevermore.

So, what it means to be holy, separated unto God, is redefined when God's power flowed through Jesus out into the world and across the ages undermining people's thinking about who is or is not acceptable before God.

A closing thought: As Christ's followers, if our lives give witness to the power of the Christ, we should expect selfish people to implore us and to touch us, seeking healing and wholeness. Have you felt a troubled heart, mind, or an angry, frightened soul reach out and selfishly touch the fabric of your life lately? Did you willingly and joyful share the healing power of God,

regardless of who they were or weren't or what their issue, as they sought to draw healing acceptance from you? How did it feel when God's power coursed through you to heal another?

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