

**Sandston Presbyterian Church**  
**A Sermon by Ken Goodrich**  
**November 23, 2008**

Scripture: Mark 5:21-34  
“A Matter of Life”—Part Two

**When Jesus had crossed the lake again, back to the other side, he was surrounded almost immediately by a great crowd. Then came one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name, who fell at Jesus’ feet and all but begged him, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Will you please come and lay your hands on her, that she might yet live.” And Jesus went with him.**

**The crowd followed and grew as it went along, pressing against him. And there was a woman of that town who had had a flow of blood for twelve years, who had suffered greatly under the care of many physicians, and had spent all that she had, but was no better; in fact, she had grown worse. She had heard the rumors about Jesus, and so, convincing herself that, “If only I can touch his garment, I might be made well,” she managed to come up behind him in the crowd and touched the hem of his robe. Immediately, her hemorrhaging ceased, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.**

**Jesus, perceiving in *himself* that power had left him, stopped in his tracks, bringing to a halt the entire parading procession, and turned to inquire, “Who touched me?” His disciples responded incredulously, “Lord, are you serious? This whole great crowd is pressing upon you, *anyone* could have *touched* you.”**

**But Jesus looked around, scanning the mob. And the woman, knowing what had been done for her, came in wonder and trembling to fall down before him, and told him what she had done and what he, in turn, had done for her. And he said, “Daughter, your faith has made you whole; *shalom*, go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”**

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It is déjà vu all over again, isn’t it? *Same* passage, *same* chapter and verse I read last Sunday about this *same* time. But during the week previous, as I was investigating what I thought was just another healing narrative from the life and times of Jesus of Nazareth, I discovered that this is *not* “just another” healing narrative, but rather is one of its kind. Because it is such a *peculiar* encounter between this woman and Jesus—which, of course, appeals to me since I am such a peculiar person, and because it raised more questions than I could answer in one sitting, I decided that I was not finished with it yet. In fact, I decided that there are at least *four or five* distinct sermons that can be easily

mined from this rich, gold bed of a tale...but since you are not likely to sit still for all of them at once, I will try to limit myself to only two or three today.

Of all the regular folk and royal, the poor and rich ones, the deeply faithful and highly dubious people, who fought each other over prime spots in line for the healing service that would begin as soon as Jesus finally stopped talking, of all those parents who dropped to their knees in front of him with a sickly son or demented daughter in their arms, of all those lepers shouting out what little was left of their lungs, begging his attention from the required *safe* distance of a stone's throw away, of all those blind and deaf, lame and deformed, fragile and frail, dying and already-dead masses of broken humanity who were carried or shouldered and thrust before Jesus to be healed—none of them thought the way this woman thought, or did what she did, or induced a reaction from Jesus quite like this one.

In every other of the long list of healing cases chronicled in the gospels, the *prescription*, the way it worked, the way it was *always done*, which effected a cure, was either by the touch of or a word from Jesus. People came *to* him, parked themselves in *front of* him, demanded and got his face-to-face focus. In turn, he *touched* their unseeing eyes; he *cupped* his hands over their unhearing ears; he *reached down* to take their hand in his and raised them up to walk, and run, and dance. Or he *commanded* the demons of disease to vacate that body they had too long inhabited; he *spoke* the requested word in response to those parents who begged him, “Just *say it*, Lord, and I know my child shall be well again;” he *instructed*...lepers, for example, to head toward the nearest synagogue and they would be made clean on the way, or a man with a withered arm to “stretch out your hand,” or, my favorite, wine stewards at a wedding to fill the emptied jars with

water—*fine*, fruity, aged water, it turns out—because the party must go on...well, truth be told, because Mary, Jewish Mother that she was, *told* him to.

But of all the fairly interesting and sometimes strange episodes of healing told in the Jesus tales, here is told perhaps the strangest and most interesting. An anonymous, insignificant, *nobody* of a woman who, as I said last week, had been physically sick, and mind sick, and sick in her soul for longer than someone should have to be sick in *any* of those ways much less all of them, has somehow gotten it into her desperate head and wrapped it around her reeling mind that if *she* could just manage to touch *him*, rather than the other way around, and not even touch *him* but merely his *hem*, then she would be healed. Slink in, sneak out. He would not even have to know, nor anyone else for that matter.

But, well, why? It was all of it, the way the gospel writers tell it, a thoroughly thought-out, well-rehearsed, most intriguing plan of hers. But, well, why? If she was going to expend what little energy she could muster to make this last-ditch effort to drag herself down the street, fight her way through the swelling throng, and actually get within arms length of the man, why would she *not* go all out or die trying to get herself in *front* of him, to *confront* him, same as everyone *else* had done who had successfully received the blessed benefit of his attention? After all *that*, how could she take the chance that *her* touching *him* would *not* be enough? Which begs another question: What made her think that it *would* be? Where did the *idea*, much less the *conviction*, come from that, “if I could only catch hold of his *shirt-tail*, or the tip of one finger just *brush* the cuffs of his trousers?” It *is* a most dramatic, drum-rolling, climactic bit of derring-do on the part of a pitiful old woman for which she *should* be rewarded; but, well, why?

The usual, short answer is that, by the nature of her illness, she was one of the untouchables, and all but unmentionables, of her overly religious, ridiculously religious religion. In a word, she was “unclean.” Because of their preposterous penchant for *purity*, both real and imagined, mostly imagined, the priests and pious of Judaism decreed that certain acts, and circumstances, and diseases rendered a person *contaminated*. Whatever this woman suffered from all those years, it had to do with blood-letting, which, along with the likes of leprosy, coming into contact with particular animals or God-forbid a human corpse, or eating prohibited foods, *defiled* to the point of isolation that individual and anyone else who, for some awful reason, came in contact with that person.

This woman was, and had been for the past twelve years, a *pariah* in her community, excommunicated from church and society, sinfully *contagious*. And so, same as if she were a leper, had she walked out of her prison of a house with her head held high, to publicly and purposely stride the streets toward Jesus, that cumbersome crowd around him would have parted like the red sea; every man, woman, and child falling all over themselves scrambling to get out of her way, lest they, too, *catch* what she had and be cast off, likewise, into her hell.

To save all of *them* all of *that*, then, or more probably out of her deep sense of shame which her own people had so *shamefully* ingrained in her, plus the fact that she was a *woman*, who had no right to and how dare she approach Jesus as if she were an equal *male* counterpart, instead she determines to try and pull off this medical experiment as surreptitiously as possible—quietly in, quickly out, none the wiser.

But I have another take on this stealth operation of hers. These *rumors* she has somehow gotten wind of about Jesus, I suspect went beyond talk of his healing prowess, as fascinating as that would have been especially to someone in her condition. She *may* have pulled herself together and up by her bootstraps for one-more-but-I-swear-this-is-the-last-time trip downtown to visit yet another in a long line of physicians, but I seriously doubt that. Nor can I make myself believe she would have convinced herself that she could be healed by secretly touching the man's *smock*, if he was just one more quack, uhm, doctor, or supposed miracle-worker, or magician even.

So no, I think the scuttlebutt she'd been hearing had more to do with the improbable plausibility that this Jesus, based on everything he'd said and done, might just be so *of* God, so connected *to* God, as to be all but indistinguishable from God.

It seems to me that *that* possibility, however remote, and *only* that possibility, would spur this woman to do what she did and inspire her to do it the way she did it. If he was of *God*, then I get how she could deduce that touching only what he was wearing would do it. *And* if he was of *God*, then I also get how she would conclude that she had to get in, get hers, and get out without *his* noticing. Because, you see, for her, the *risk* was not that she wouldn't be healed if she didn't come face-to-face with him, but that she wouldn't be healed if she *did* come face-to-face with him!

The most frightening thing, what would tear out her heart and kill her soul, was that Jesus, this man sent by, for, and of *God*, would react to and treat her *just as* her own religious leaders—men supposedly *of* God—did. That Jesus, speaking for *God*, would affirm the verdict of her church that she was unclean, unworthy, unimportant, unbearable, *un-everything*. That Jesus, as *God*, would uphold the sentence of her community that she

should be confined, isolated, cut-off from the living, because she was just as good as dead; that she was only good...dead. If she put herself squarely in front of Jesus, only to hear *him* confirm with God's own stamp of approval what the priests of God, the church of God, the people of God, and even the book of God had been telling her and doing to her all these years, then she might as well *be* dead.

All of which is why I think Jesus did not, would not, could not possibly, let her get away without setting the record straight, without setting her, and his people, and especially the most *religious* of his people, straight.

Jesus, feeling that power had left him... The man is moving forward as resolutely as he possibly can, Jairus' hand hard on his elbow, urging him along toward his dying daughter, a paparazzi-like mob impeding his every step, *jostling* his every step, when he feels this unmistakable, well, *zap*. *Bzzzt!* I can so readily and deliciously imagine him trying and failing to suppress a knowing smile—"Hmmm, *that* was interesting. Someone just siphoned off a healing piece of me?" And then, of course, hurrying on, because he was in a do-or-die *hurry*, right?

But, no, as is the case so often with Jesus, he does just the opposite of what you'd expect him to do. He doesn't let it go, doesn't let *her* go...*unnoticed*, as she has been these past twelve years; doesn't *allow* the anonymity she has been forced to live with these past twelve years; doesn't let either *her* nor all the rest of *them* off that easily. *Them*—the religious leaders, the religious *followers*, the townspeople, the community, the neighborhood—who had ostracized her, shunned her, labeled her: *they* were every bit as much the reason as she was that Jesus stopped in his tracks to ask his absurd question, "Who touched me?" *They* were the ones, as much as she was, to whom Jesus was talking

when he addressed *her* as *daughter*, and he was announcing to *them* even *more* than to her, “*Your* faith has made this happen; *you* did this.” *She* did not need to be told that; she already *knew*! *She* knew it, Jesus knew it; but purposefully, publicly, and firmly, he made certain everyone *else* knew it. And because Jesus did what *he* did for this woman and said what *he* said to her, there was a story for the gospel writers to hear about and write down so that *we* know it, as well. Will we ever *learn* it, though?

Learn it, and practice it, and go on the record saying it? That God is so far more inclusive than exclusive, that God is so much more about tearing down barriers between people than building walls and posting sentries to keep them separate and apart and *out*, that God is infinitely more about saving than condemning, about embracing in acceptance than pushing away in fear.

This woman heard and *learned* about *God* that day, against and in spite of all the teaching and belief and attitudes about God to the contrary from her religion and her church. We, also, *hear* it—we the church, we Christians, we Presbyterians—we *read* it, we preachers proclaim “This is the Word of the Lord,” we all of us respond, “Thanks be to God.” But do we, will we, ever, *learn* it?