

PILGRIM CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

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TO TOUCH THE HOLY

Leviticus 15: 19-31 Luke 8: 40-56

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When I was in seminary I had a wonderful preaching teacher, a man named Bill Muehl. He had started out his professional life as a very gifted criminal lawyer until he got bleeding ulcers. His doctor recommended a change of career, and after several years as the elocution professor at Yale College he was asked to take one semester of preaching at Yale Divinity School while the regular preaching professor was being replaced. That was about twenty years ago and still this man with no formal theological training, no ministerial credentials, teaches Intermediate and Advanced Homiletics at Yale, one of the best teachers I ever had. One of the things Bill used to tell, probably still tells, his advanced preaching class is that are times in a minister's life when a certain biblical text becomes preoccupying, when out of the blue you find yourself thinking about it and talking about it, when you feel almost pursued by it. As you turn it over and over in your mind it takes on a new life and excitement, a variety of meaning and nuance you never saw before. "That's when," he used to tell us, "that's when you forget the lectionary text, if your church preaches from a lectionary, or you forget your sermon series, and you preach on that text, because the purpose of the preaching exercise is to take the biblical record and make it come alive to your congregation, and the best time to do that is when it is most alive you you."

My sermon for you today is a product of his advice. Over the past three weeks a story that I had never really thought about in scripture, the story of Jesus healing the woman with the flow of blood, from Luke, that story has been pursuing me. After thinking about it and talking about it in one place and another, it seems time to try to organize myself enough to preach a sermon on it and the various levels of meaning it conveys to me.

When I was younger and I read this story, all that occurred to me was that here was a woman who had been chronically ill for twelve years--that's a long time to be sick--and Jesus healed her of whatever disease she had. It was hard to figure out the exact nature of her disease; the biblical euphemism, "a flow or issue of blood", is delicate enough to allow much ambiguity, enough ambiguity that more than one woman in my Search group did not know what was meant by it. For any of the rest of you who remain unclear, what Luke is trying to say so delicately is that woman had suffered from some sort of uterine bleeding for twelve years. Which means, in the terms of Jewish society and first century culture that this woman had not only been sick for twelve years, she had also been ritually unclean; in the words of the biblical text, "in her impurity," for that amount of time.

Now, you heard in the Old Testament reading from Leviticus a portion of the Jewish Law which has to do with women and their times of bleeding, whether it be their regular menstrual periods or uterine bleeding from any other cause. If there was any part of the Jewish law which had ingrained itself in the life and culture of the people, it was this blood taboo. Women who were bleeding were absolute pariahs within their communities. Their "impurity" was on the same level as that of a pig, or a heathen idol, or a dead body. And although the law only forbade touching women in such times, or touching that which they had touched, custom had translated these injunctions to disallow any contact whatsoever with a woman who was bleeding. She remained in virtual isolation; except in direst emergencies, no one would speak to her, eat with her, look at her, even enter a room where she was. This woman who came to Jesus to be healed had not only been sick for a long time, she had lived as an outcast among her people for all those years.

Now any traditional rabbi, once he knew that he or his garments had been touched by such a woman, would have immediately gone away by himself until the sun

had set and he could go through a ritual cleansing. He would have known himself to be contaminated; by the word of the law he was contaminated. He would have no kind words at all for a woman who had interrupted him publicly in the middle of an important conversation with a ruler of the synagogue and made him a partner with her in her uncleanness. But Jesus did not go away and hide himself. He did not rebuke the woman who had touched him. And he proceeded from that place to go to the house of Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, and raise Jairus's daughter from the dead. Given the way Jesus ought to have behaved, this is a very unusual story, one which to me has at least three major things to teach us.

The first and most obvious of these has to do with Jesus and his attitude towards and interactions with women. The major justification in Hebrew society for the second-class status of women within society came from the understanding that women spent about twenty-five percent of their adult lives in a state of "impurity." I still have a hard time emotionally understanding what that must have meant for those women, but the fact is that every adult woman spent seven days out of twenty-eight, a quarter of her life, classified as "unclean," as the same sort of affront to purity and holiness as a rotting corpse or a heathen altar. It was because of this so-called innate impurity which afflicted all normal women that they could not become priests, that they could have entrance only into the most peripheral areas of the temple, that they had to sit behind the screen of the synagogue, could not engage in religious discussions, or have any direct contact with that which was holy, with that which represented God's presence in the world. Women, because of their cycles of bleeding, were seen as inherently unable and unfit to be religiously significant. The argument was that they would pollute the holy, that their impurity would be contagious and desecrate that which was most sacred.

When Jesus accepted the touch of the woman who was bleeding, when he spoke to her and pronounced her healed, when he said to her, "Go in peace," in the presence of the crowd all about him, he, in that one gesture, took all that conventional wisdom and all of those generations of theology about women's innate uncleanness because of their femaleness, he took all that and just threw it out, tore it apart, demonstrated it to be untrue. And especially, that demonstration would have been crucially important to the crowd which surrounded him. Here was a man who, according to the law, by the touch of a bleeding woman should have at least temporarily lost any claim to holiness he possessed, severed any contact with God, and he went directly from the woman's touch to the bedside of the child who had just died and he called the child back to life, making it clear beyond a shadow of a doubt that whatever holiness he had possessed, he still possessed. That whatever power God had granted him to work in God's name had not been taken away. The message of this story is clear; that women in their bleeding, women, by fact of nature, are not unclean; their touch cannot desecrate the holy; that no atonement must be made before God for the simple biology of the woman's body. All this may not seem very astonishing to us in our "enlightened" age, but to the crowd which followed Jesus, it would have been absolutely revolutionary, upsetting some of that society's most deeply held convictions about women and their place in God's world.

Just so that we do not become too self-satisfied with our own enlightenment: Greek Orthodox women are still not allowed to enter a church during any periods of bleeding; the Episcopal Bishop of San Diego only last year cited "women's impurity" as a barrier to ordaining women as priests, and there is still a whole lot of subtle and not so subtle convention in our own culture which casts all that I was so delicately brought up to call "female things" in the class of the unclean or unsavory or unmentionable.

We, like the crowd in first century Galilee, are still tied by convention and taboo to some erroneous distinctions between male and female that we would do well to reevaluate if we would be faithful to this story. That is the first point

I wanted to make today: that Jesus in this story exploded then current conceptions about what it meant to be female, and by freeing women from the onus of uncleanness challenges us in the church to continue to overturn any such erroneous and debilitating distinctions.

But there is more that this story has to teach us, much of which has to do with the interaction between that which we call holy or pure or good and that which we would term as unholy or impure or evil. The sanctions against touching ritually unclean objects in Jewish society came about because of an assumption, probably unconscious, that people made about what would happen if that which was unclean came into contact with that which was clean. The assumption was that that which was clean would also become unclean, that that which was holy would become defiled, that that which was good would become tainted with evil. Anything which was less than perfect had to be held back from contact with that which represented God or somehow the very sacredness of God would become compromised.

There is much of this attitude which I believe carries over into the present, both in our secular and our religious lives. For example, in secular terms it is almost a cliché to talk about parents warning their children away from "bad company" as if the only result of such interaction could be that the child which was better would become worse, rather than the other way around, that the good example of the one would in fact be a means of healing for the other.

I remember several years ago, I was on a bus from New York to Tenafly, New Jersey to visit some cousins of mine. In back of me on the bus were two women on their way home after a day in the city. One said to the other, "Don't you worry about your son hanging around with that awful Schilling boy? There's been so much trouble in that family; I've heard he's become sort of a wild kid. I'm surprised you let your son see so much of him." And the other mother answered, "No, I'm not worried. My boy knows who he is. He's a good boy and I'm proud that he's taking an interest in the Schilling boy at a time when others seem to be avoiding him. It can only be good for that poor boy to have a friend like my son."

Now I did not know either of these two women, and I would never recognize the one if I saw her again, but I felt like cheering her that afternoon on the bus and still feel warmed when I think of her today. She knew the truth that Luke would convey to us in this morning's story about Jesus' contact with the woman. The truth that it is entirely as possible for that which is good to heal that which is evil as it is for evil to pollute that which is good. That in fact, if it is God we are talking about, then all manner of evil and uncleanness and hurt and brokenness can be brought before God, and there is no chance that God will be diminished, but every possibility that that which needs cleansing, restoring or fixing will be transformed.

Jesus healed the sick woman; he was not made sick by her. And therefore, we, when we would encounter God, have no need to dress ourselves up, to put on our fanciest clothes, and look for our most eloquent words. We do not need to hide that in us which we consider to be damaged or unhealthy or unacceptable. We can not defile God, but God's presence can be a source of healing to us if we will but allow our unsightliness and imperfections to be, rather than trying to pretend them out of existence. I read in a religious magazine a few months ago about a chapel at some seminary, I forget which one, which has a notice tacked by the door which reads something like this. "You are welcome to enter this room even if you have peanut butter on your sleeve or dirt under your fingernails. You are welcome to enter this room if you are sick or tired or lonely. You are welcome to enter this room if you just had a fight with your spouse or your roommate and are feeling out of charity with the world. You are welcome to enter this room if your weakest point has just been revealed for all to see. You are welcome to enter this room no matter who and what you are. Come, and sit with God, and be made new."

It is so easy for us to take seriously the polluting power of that which is evil or impure. One of the things this story of Jesus healing the woman says to me is that we must take equally seriously the transforming power of that which is good, the healing power of God.

There is one other point which I would make about this morning's story from Luke. It is a small point, but one which I think is important especially for those of us who have a tendency to get caught up in our busyness, in meeting our obligations, in getting done that which must be done. The woman who wanted to be healed interrupted Jesus in the middle of a discussion of literally life and death importance with one of the most important people in town. Jesus could have treated the woman as a nuisance, chastized her, and sent her on her way. After all, which is more important: healing this woman who had lived with her illness for twelve years and could probably go a few days longer or rushing to the bedside of the daughter of the ruler of the synagogue who was at the point of death? It would have been easy to turn the woman away, and to justify it. But Jesus allowed himself to be interrupted, and that interruption proved significant both to the woman and to the crowd. In fact, one of the qualities which defines Jesus in all of the gospels is his ability to let the lives of the people around him break into and interrupt his plan for what he was saying or where he was going. The interruption would yield as much opportunity to teach or learn or reveal God as the original plan.

I had a roommate in college who, whenever things would disrupt her schedule, which was often, would stand in the middle of the room and scream, "I can't stand this. My life is getting in the way of my work." It was a sort of ritual for her, for she said that whenever she said those words out loud, their basic absurdity would be made clear to her. That's the way life ^{is}; it sometimes interrupts our work. And we can resent those interruptions and treat them as nuisances, trying to get rid of them, or we can live them, use them as opportunities for teaching and learning, find as much meaning in them as in that which we had thought we would do.

"And a woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years and could not be healed by anyone came up behind Jesus, and touched the fringe of his garment, and immediately her flow of blood ceased." For weeks now this text has been pursuing me. The lessons which it would teach have seemed new and fresh and important. Jesus, in this story, personifies the holy, and the lessons the story teaches us all have to do with our possibilities for interaction with that which is holy, with that which represents God. First of all we learn that Jesus believed that women, by the condition of their femaleness, could not legitimately be barred from interaction with that which is sacred. Beyond that, the story teaches us that there is no individual weakness or infirmity or spot of any kind which should make us shy away from the presence of God. We may bring all that is imperfect within us into God's sight, and in so doing we may be healed. And finally, the story tells us something about where and how we find God in our lives, how we come into contact with the holy, and that may not necessarily be through scheduled appearances, in the times and places that we plan. Sometimes the healing presence of God may be revealed in that which we would consider to be only an interruption, and therefore we should not be too quick to get on with our work at the expense of our life.

And Jesus said to the woman, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

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