“Courage to own our Truth”

a sermon by

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

Scriptures: 2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

*Oh God of compassion and hope, may your Word here be spoken, and may your Word here be heard. AMEN.*

As I meditated on our Gospel passage for today, I found myself increasingly drawn to the hemorrhaging woman within it. We are told that she has been suffering for 12 years. 12 years. Her condition—some sort of bleeding disorder—includes not only chronic physical pain, but also renders her “impure,” or “unclean.”

The Hebrew Scriptures offer two contrasting sets of laws for how impurity is to be handled, but in either case, it’s not a picnic. In the best case scenario, this woman has had to wash her hands before touching anyone, or anything that others might touch, for 12 years straight. In the worst case scenario, she has been exiled from the community and forced to live in complete isolation. Either of these scenarios would leave *me* feeling alienated—forced to live with a single-minded focus on my condition.

Indeed, she comes to us *without* a name—she is introduced to us only as “a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for 12 years,” and is referred to simply as “the woman” thereafter. It is implied that her entire identity, for us, for the community in which she used to belong, and for her, is contained in her illness.

PAUSE.

Last week, Chris gave a powerful sermon on the work of creating racial justice. “The woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for 12 years” had a lot to say to me this week about that long work.

The racial injustices that our long history of slavery continues to perpetuate have seemed to be coming more and more to our shared consciousness this past 12 months. And, just as the racism inherent in our institutions and policies has become a more prominent defining feature of our country in the past year, my whiteness has seemed to define my identity more and more. With each new incident of racism, I seem to focus in more and more on the color of my skin. Like the woman, whose pain and contagious impurity has necessitated a single-minded focus on her hemorrhaging, the pain and injustice my whiteness, and the privilege it affords have seemed to necessitate an almost single-minded focus on this aspect of my identity.

Whiteness is societally constructed not just to be a benign characteristic of my appearance, but a condition for privilege so far-reaching none of us can fully grasp its extent. It has defined me from my earliest moments….even *before* my birth, in the kind of physician care my mother and I received while I was in her womb.

And like the woman, as my whiteness has loomed larger and larger, I have become painfully aware of the isolation it carries with it. I long to act—to “be on the side of racial justice,”[[1]](#footnote-1) as one social ethicist has put it- to Wake Jesus Up, where he sleeps in my heart, as Chris challenged us last week, but, like many of us, I haven’t had any idea where to begin.

This same social ethicist wrote of her experience at a rally she went to after the Rodney King decision and the resulting riots in LA, *“I felt urgency and passion about the injustice of the acquittal and the entrenched institutional racism that made it possible, yet I felt mute and inert…I did not know what to do….The thing I remember most vividly about that day…was not a sense of empowerment or connection with anti-racist activism, but a profound sense of isolation and incoherence.”*

I certainly relate, I wonder if some of you might, too?

PAUSE

So, where do I begin? If attending marches and rallies is not the relief many of us want it to turn out to be, where then, does each among us who wants to stand in solidarity, to act for justice, actually begin?

The hemorrhaging woman has more to say to us. Our Gospel reading today was rich with characters and storyline. What has really drawn me to *this* woman, out of everyone in the story, is not her isolation. Nor is it her suffering, as relatable as they are to me. What draws me to this woman is her courage.

She has sought help for her bleeding from every physician she could find, “enduring much” we are told. Given how physically painful even our modern medicine can be, I can only imagine the pain she has experienced in these last 12 years. She has done all that she knows to do, exhausting all of her money in her quest for healing. She arrives at the back of the crowd. As it has been for 12 years, the contagiousness of her impurity is at the forefront of her mind.

Yet, as one scholar described it, *“With fear and trembling, she goes in search of the healer.  She may have had to convince herself that the quest was worth it and that he would not judge or reject her because of her illness… she may have endured quizzical stares, not to mention snide remarks, jeers, and looks of annoyance.  Still she pushes her way through the crowd, and touches Jesus, releasing the energy that created the universe, the energy of love that flowed from the healer from Nazareth.”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Where do *we* begin? We, too, begin with courage. And although courage is difficult to manufacture, it does come whenever we honor our own pain and suffering. In my own experience, courage comes when we focus more and more on those “conditions” which have dictated our behaviors and cost us relationships. When we finally acknowledge just how much of life has been lost in their wake, and we can’t bear to lose any more…the courage needed to do something about it slowly bubbles up.

We have all been hemorrhaging in some way for far more than 12 years at the hands of racial inequality, no matter our skin color. We have all experienced far more than 12 years of isolation and incoherence. As my whiteness, and all it has cost me and others, becomes ever-more the focus of my identity, my courage is building.

But, courage for what? The woman speaks to us yet again. The courage to which we are to aspire is not just to power through the crowd so that we might touch Jesus’ robes and be healed. As for the woman, the courage we need is the courage to look Jesus in the eye and tell him the whole truth of our identity. The courage we need is the courage to move beyond our fears of saying the wrong thing, thinking the wrong thing, being the wrong thing, and really talk about our skin color. For those of us who are white, it is the courage to own our whiteness and the privilege it affords us. It is the courage to explore the reality of our identity even when we have tried so hard not to use it for our gain, even when we have tried to use it to advocate for others, even when we may have been disadvantaged by a host of other aspects of our identity, including poverty and abuse.

PAUSE

"Who touched my clothes?" Jesus asked. He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter……..your faith has made you well.”

PAUSE.

Coming to us defined by her illness, the woman leaves us with a new identity. After her truth-telling, she is no longer defined by illness. She is now defined by relationship—No longer the woman who had been hemorrhaging, she is now….Daughter.[[3]](#footnote-3) Daughter of God, daughter of the community from which she was estranged. She is well. Her isolation is replaced by connection to the ultimate source of loving being, and, therefore, connection to her community and the richness of her life with others.

This sort of courage, resulting in this sort of truth-telling to Jesus, *will* result in our transformation, too. Our identities *will* go from being defined by our conditions, our isolation, our fear—to being defined by our relationships. Once we explore the unedited story of our own racial identity and then present that truth to Christ, we *will* be opened for authentic relationship with those of other races for whom we wish to stand in solidarity…and indeed, relationship building is the next step after truth-telling.

My courage to do such critical self-exploration is building…Is yours?

Can we, St. Paul’s, be a place where that exploration can happen?

Can we, the enfleshed Body of Christ, welcome the courage of each other’s truth, proclaim each other made well, and define each other by those relationships to which our healing will guide us?

Can we talk about race?

GO AND SIT DOWN.

1. Karin A. Case, “Claiming White Social Location as a Site of Resistance to White Supremacy,” in Disrupting White Supremacy from Within: White People on What We Need to Do,” (Pilgrim Press, 2004) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bruce Epperly, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2012/06/the-adventurous-lectionary-fifth-sunday-after-pentecost/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Susan Haber, “A Woman's Touch: Feminist Encounters with the Hemorrhaging Woman in Mark 5.24-34,” Journal for the Study of the New Testament (26.2) 2003; 171-192 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)