

Gospel means good news, and to get the full impact of the good news found in this gospel story from Mark today, we need to understand that at the moment this woman came up to Jesus in the crowd to touch his cloak, to take a chance on being healed, to cause Jesus to turn around and want to find her in the crowd, and to strike up a conversation with her about power and telling the truth, at the moment all this happened, Jesus had somewhere else to be.

In Mark's gospel, as in all the gospels, Jesus almost always had somewhere else to be. Last week, I preached for you at the edge of a lake, because that's where Jesus was in our story last week. This week he's in the middle of a large crowd. I'm sorry I couldn't preach for you from the middle of a large crowd. That would have been interesting. But there's a threat of thunder and lightning in the air today and, well, I'd rather not. Plus, unless you're seeking something that can absolutely be found only in a crowd, unless you're running for office or something and require the sound of clapping thunder, is anyone hanging out in a large crowd these days? So I'm back on my porch today, where the balloon sign behind me says it's still the best day ever.

Jesus, however, is off with the crowds, though it must be said, he is not running for office. In fact, a fuller reading of the story and we discover that he's really not that into crowds, or at least not the kind of crowd he's in with this morning. There are some crowds that Jesus seems to be at home with—smaller crowds primarily; 3, 4, maybe 12 people at most. He likes a crowd he can get away with, go on retreat with—up a mountain, out on a boat, where it's possible to have serious conversation about serious matters, where it's more listening than talking. We know Jesus was on a mountain with just a small crowd when he delivered the words of our Call to Worship this morning: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, they get a kingdom of heaven today. Blessed are the meek, they get to have the whole earth today. Blessed are the merciful, they get mercy today. Blessed are those who suffer injustice of any kind in my name, they get a kingdom of heaven today."

It's call for serious conversation, how in a world like ours—how in any world—the meek wind up inheriting the whole earth, and those who suffer injustice end up with the keys to heaven. Jesus welcomed the stranger, preached an economy of grace, moved to the margins of every circle, and carried a cross. How in a world like ours is that ever going to fly? In a world like ours, either nothing that Jesus said is ever going to come true, or something else is going to have to happen.

Enter a woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years. We've already said that she enters the story at a moment when Jesus has somewhere else to be. He is on his way to the home of Jairus, a synagogue leader who comes to Jesus begging him to come and lay his healing hands on his little daughter, who, according to her father, "is at the point of death." That Jesus goes with Jairus is the cause for the large crowd that now swarms around him. Everyone wants to see what Jesus is going to do. A little girl, at the point of death, Jesus, whose reputation for performing miracles precedes him—this ought to be good. Plus, Jesus isn't known for saying yes to these kinds of requests. Normally, the sick people have to go to Jesus. Jesus doesn't usually go to them. And normally the sick people don't have fathers who are leaders down at the local synagogue, because generally speaking, the synagogue leaders and Jesus aren't known for getting along. To them, Jesus, with his insistence that belief in God should not be a prerequisite for belonging to God, was a threat to their establishment and tradition which said, not only is belief a prerequisite for belonging, but so is behavior. Except when you've done your best to behave in all the right ways, because you believed this would somehow protect you against the pain of the world, and then your daughter, your *little* daughter, gets sick anyway, you suddenly realize that no amount of good belief or behavior is going to make up for that fact that right now you just want someone to make you feel like you belong. So Jesus, who believes first and last in belonging, goes with Jairus, even Jairus.

But on his way to the house, a woman who has been hemorrhaging for 12 years stops him dead in his tracks. Suffice it to say, like Jairus, this woman is also in a rush. She has been bleeding for 12 years. Whether it's a constant bleeding or an on-and-off-again bleeding,

we're not told. Regardless, she knows time is running out for her, life is running out on her. It is not just her body that is hemorrhaging, it is also her spirit, and her whole world. She also knows, however, what her synagogue leader, who in this case might actually be Jairus, would tell her: that by going outside and being among the crowd she is behaving very badly. People, and by people we mean the men—because let's face it, Mark tells us this woman is bleeding in a way that all the women would understand, if only the bleeding would stop—but the men, the men who set the rules are going to be offended. Which is why ancient religious law prohibited women from being out and about during their bleeding times. You stay at home, and when it passes, you can come out again. Until then, you don't belong here. But for this woman it's been 12 years! She's not like the blind man from Jericho who sat by the roadside every day, and one day when Jesus came by, he yelled out, "Jesus, have mercy on me." And Jesus heard him, and stopped, and healed him. No, this woman can't do that, because she can't even go outside. And she's not like Jairus's little daughter. She has no father to plead her case. She is alone.

Then one day she decides she's had enough. She gets up, walks outside into the busy streets, blood trailing behind her, and in a stroke of defiant civil disobedience, she goes to find Jesus. When she gets to him, she touches him and finds that she is healed, that her bleeding has stopped, and she walks away.

Now we want to read this story the same way we read most stories in the Bible. As being a story about Jesus, and how he does for this needy woman what no one else is willing to do, because he is Jesus, and we should be like Jesus. Sermon over. Except that's not at all how the story goes. Mark says that when the woman gets to Jesus, he doesn't notice her at all. And that when the woman reaches out to touch Jesus, she doesn't have his permission to do so. She puts a hand upon Jesus and something like healing power goes out of Jesus and enters into the woman, and this is when Jesus takes notice. "Who touched me? Who took away a piece of my power without asking first?" The woman, Mark says, is terrified. Probably thinks Jesus will scold her for stepping out of her place; call her a dirty name. Instead, Jesus calls her, daughter. "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of all your disease."

In the end, Jesus rewards the woman for her faith. Not her faith in him, but her faith in herself. Her faith in stepping out, in believing that this world still ought to hold a place in it for her. She sets out that day, a bleeding, out-casted woman. She returns home, a daughter, a member of the family.

Yesterday, I was driving along in the car with Rowan in the backseat. Rowan, who's really into basketball these days and loves to watch any NBA game that's on TV, was commenting on how most teams refused to play this week, and how he hoped there might be a game on again tonight that he could watch. "Do you know why the players are refusing to play?" I asked him.

"Because people are fighting, and this is their way of trying to get them to stop."

"Who are the people, and do you know what they're fighting over?" I hadn't talked with him about anything going on in the news this week, so I was curious to know what he had heard.

"The people are all of us, and they're fighting over a man who got shot by the police this week. Mom says he was black and that he got shot 7 times."

He was quiet for a moment, as was I. Then he said this: "Why would you shoot someone 7 times? Couldn't they have just helped the man instead?"

It's call for serious conversation, how in a world like ours the meek are ever going to inherit the earth, and those who suffer injustice will get the keys to the kingdom. Jesus welcomed the stranger, preached an economy of grace, moved to the margins of every circle, carried a cross, and said this is how you make the world great. But how is any of that ever going to fly? In a world like ours, how is any of it going to fly? It's a call for serious conversation, and I suppose either nothing Jesus said is ever going to come true, or we're going to have to help each other out. And we should help each other out, because I think Rowan's right, and God knows, we can.