

Did you notice? I suspect you may not have. Today's Gospel lesson includes a hemorrhaging woman.

Did you notice her? This woman appears in 3 of the 4 Gospels. Yet she is always sandwiched in the middle of another story, the story of Jairus and his dead daughter. And in the old lectionary, the old list of readings, she was always edited out of that story as an interruption.

Talk about symbolic. Here's a woman who's nameless. Here's a woman with no status in her culture. Her story seems like an interruption to the much flashier miracle of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter from the dead. Consequently, as a church, we've found it all too easy to skip over her story.

Did you notice? Well, today, with the newer lectionary, her story is included. And I'd like to take a closer look at it.

Our Gospel today starts with Jairus. Jairus is the administrative and organizational head of the local synagogue. This makes him a very important person in the Jewish community. People look up to him. He carries great prestige and status. People look to him for leadership and guidance and answers.

But Jairus has a 12 year old daughter who is dying. And there's nothing he can do about it. His status and his prestige count for nothing in this case. So he goes to Jesus. He throws himself in the dirt at Jesus' feet. And he begs Jesus to come and help his daughter. And Jesus agrees, and goes with him.

Did you notice? I've been talking about Jairus. He's the flashy character in the story. He's the one my eye is drawn toward. He's the one I identify with. He's the one I preached about 3 years ago on this Sunday. But in the midst of the Jairus story, almost as an interruption, Mark gives us the story of the Hemorrhagic Woman.

This is a woman it's easy to overlook.

Some people seem easy to ignore. The awkward adolescent. The old person who keeps repeating the same story over and over again. The person who might be a couple of cans shy of a six pack. This woman in Mark falls into that same kind of category.

We're told that she's been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. It was probably some sort of chronic uterine bleeding. Now you might think, "My that's unfortunate." But there's much more to her condition than that.

Do you know what 12 years of chronic bleeding would mean in an ancient Jewish culture? Blood was ritually unclean. Anyone who came into contact with blood became ritually unclean. Good Jews even slaughtered their animals for food by slitting their throats so that the blood would drain from the body. They didn't even want their lamb chops to be medium rare. Blood was ritually unclean.

Now unclean doesn't mean dirty. It means ritually impure. The opposite of unclean is Holy. If you were in an unclean state, then you weren't allowed to come to a holy temple to worship a holy God. For the Jews, if you were unclean you were unfit to come into God's holy presence.

And the thing about uncleanness is, it's contagious. If something's unclean, and you touch it, then you become unclean. Then if you touch something it becomes unclean, and if someone else touches that, then they become unclean. And if you were unclean, you would have to wash yourself and wash your clothes and then sit around and wait for a prescribed period of time before you could go worship in the Temple or in a Synagogue. Being unclean was like being in a religious penalty box. You were given a religious time out.

We might think that's a bit kooky, to be so picky about a little blood.

But what about us? We too are awfully careful with blood these days. What's the modern protocol around blood? Bleach and latex gloves. We know that blood can be dangerous.

We also have the expression, "One bad apple can spoil the whole barrel." We talk about the danger of falling in with the wrong crowd. We know that certain bad things can contaminate other things. That was the Jewish view when it came to blood. That's all well and good in theory. But think what it meant for the poor Hemorrhagic Woman.

The woman has been bleeding for 12 years. Do you know what that would mean for her day to day life? It would mean that no one in her family could touch her. They couldn't give her a hug or a kiss. For 12 years! They couldn't lie down in her bed. They couldn't sit in the same chair that she had sat in. She would have to have her own set of dishes. They couldn't share hers. No one would shake her hand in public. No one would want to touch her under any circumstance.

Can you imagine the isolation? I would think that such a condition would make her desperate for a cure.

Actually, she was desperate. Did you notice?

Mark tells us that she had "endured much under many physicians." She had bankrupted herself looking for a cure. But she didn't get better. In fact she got worse.

Do you know what kind of treatment she would have had to endure? Doctors at that time were looked down upon, probably for good reason. First century Jewish doctors were not the well trained professionals we know today. We'd probably describe them more as snake oil salesmen or quacks. There was a Jewish saying that you should never stay in a town where the leading citizen is a physician. There was another saying: even the best of doctors are destined for hell.

And the treatments these doctors would prescribe are shocking. Actually, some have come down to us. Here are a couple of ancient medical treatments her doctors might have prescribed for chronic uterine hemorrhaging:

Prescription 1: The woman should sit at a crossroads, holding a cup of wine. Then a man should come up from behind, frighten her, and say "Cease your discharge." That's it. Cured! Well, that might stop hiccups, but I doubt that would stop uterine bleeding.

Prescription 2: She should find dung from a white mule. She should pick the barley seeds out of the mule dung, and she should eat the seeds. Then she should refrain from having a bowel movement for 3 days. Then she would be cured. Yuck. Yuck. And yuck.

This kind of kookiness is what this poor woman has had to endure. Those are the kinds of treatments she's had to go through. She has bankrupted herself paying the doctors their fees. She tried their bizarre suggestions. And she got worse. For 12 years, she kept hemorrhaging.

One day, she sees Jesus passing by. Did you notice her?

Jairus didn't notice her. He was trying to hurry home with Jesus. The disciples didn't notice her. They were too busy just trying to get through the press of the crowd themselves.

But there is one person who notices her.

Mark says that, "She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.'

And Mark says, "Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease."

Notice what's happening here. With Jesus, things are working backwards. Her touch should have made Jesus unclean. Her touch should have made Jesus less than Holy. But the opposite happens. Jesus' holiness makes her clean. Jesus infects her and contaminates her with his holiness, not the other way around. The one Holy apple makes the whole rotten barrel good.

And Jesus notices her.

Mark says, "Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?"

And his disciples said to him basically, 'Are you kidding?' "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?' "

But Jesus looked all around to see who had done it. And the woman came up and knelt at his feet and told him what she had done.

And Jesus said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

Notice that word. Daughter. A word of relationship. She had been in isolation because of her bleeding. But now she is given a new relationship with the one who has healed her.

And notice what Jesus commends. Her faith.

It is by her faith that she reaches out to receive the holy and healing touch of Jesus.

She is healed of her hemorrhage. She is healed of her fear. She is healed of the isolation. She is healed by her faith.

She reaches out, and Jesus heals her.

Did you notice? Jesus does the same thing to Jairus' daughter too. He touches her, and he infects her with life. His life brings her back from death.

And he can do wonders for you as well.

If you feel out of step with those around you, let Jesus touch you.

If you feel lonely or isolated, reach out to him.

If you need wholeness or holiness in your life, let him infect you.

If you feel estranged or separated from God, let him call you daughter or son.

He will notice you. Come to him in faith. And let him touch your life.