

The Truth, Trembling

Sermon for Proper 8, July 1 2018 // St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

It is a privilege to be with you today, a privilege always to be asked to preach. Especially this morning. This story from Mark's gospel about the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' garment was one of the very first Bible stories I knew that moved me. I may be a latecomer to the Church, but I was right on time with Sam Cooke. And his song, "Touch the Hem of His Garment," made it onto many a soul-music mix tape I made in the 90s. If you don't know it, you need it.

But this story is so interesting and so rich, all about divine touch and truth-telling. It's a story within a story: Jesus is on his way to heal Jairus's daughter and on his way to heal her, a crowd begins following him, and in that crowd there is a woman, chronically bleeding and down to her last hope who is convinced if she can just touch Jesus' cloak, she will be healed. And so she is. What a joyful message that is: healing on the way to healing, goodness on the way to more goodness, a miracle on the way to yet another miracle as Jairus's daughter is restored to life. What good news we are given!

Of course there is more to it, though, when I look closer. For one thing, before either of these miracles can occur— before the bleeding woman can be cured and before the daughter can be healed— before either miracle can happen, there is a whole lot of pain that must be endured first; there is despair; there is tremendous suffering. And it is only in their desperation—a sort of last resort—that they come seeking Jesus for help. This woman has been hemorrhaging for twelve years, has spent all her money, all her modesty, and nearly all her hope, and only in an act of desperation does she come forward— risking further humiliation by appearing in public as an unclean, bleeding woman— only at her most desperate is she healed. There's a lesson in there I'm still working through about trauma preceding miracle...

Hers is a private agony and a private shame made public, this woman who woke morning after morning for twelve years in a body no one desired, a menstrual condition that would have ostracized her from everyone, made her untouchable. Her trauma, you see, preceded her miracle. Similarly, Jairus's daughter has to die before she is made well. And Jairus himself must enter into his own very public desperation, his own pleading. It seems to me just as labor precedes birth, so trauma precedes miracle, pain precedes mercy, desperation precedes grace.

But it is this one sentence from Mark that's maybe one of the most poignant sentences I know: We read, "But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth." See, this is the story not only of divine touch but of truth telling, no matter how fearful we are to say it. The writer Anne Lamott (in a book I love called *Help Thanks Wow, the Three Essential Prayers*) says that "prayer is our sometimes real selves trying to communicate with the Real, with Truth, with the Light. It is us reaching out to be heard, hoping to be found.... You might shout at the top of your lungs," she says, "or whisper into your sleeve, 'I hate you, God.' And that is a prayer too because it is real, it is the truth and maybe it is the first sincere thought you've had in months."

It's an ancient story, of course, the trembling woman touching Jesus— but I cannot help but think this is clearly a story for us right now — a story about what we are willing to risk to speak the truth, about what it means to step out in faith though we are deeply afraid, a story about humiliation and shame and despair that quite often if not always precedes healing and grace. In the last year, we have witnessed the beginnings of a revolution — women, and some men, coming forward with their truth, making public their private shame of sexual abuse and silence and assault and degradation, hopeful that by telling the whole truth (though they may tell it trembling) they might begin not only to heal themselves but to heal a world that despite its goodness and beauty can be quite ugly and quite cruel. It may be a small gesture — just the hem of his garment— but it is large enough to begin to change a life.

I will tell you the truth about something. Several years ago, I came to Saint Stephen's one Sunday afternoon, knowing nothing about this church except for its exterior beauty. I came seeking safety from a hostile living situation. I was mixed up in a dangerous relationship with a man who, I do think, had a good heart though he was damaged, but a man who also had some terribly bad habits. And he was abusive. One afternoon I needed to disappear. I was terrified of him and I knew I needed to get somewhere where I would not be found. So I came here. I sat right in that chapel, knowing nothing about how to pray or who to pray to or what even I needed to ask, knowing nothing about church, only that I was in a part of town he would never think to come and in a place he would never think to look. I sat in the chapel and wept and hid and I ended up staying for the Celtic service that evening, disoriented but feeling I had found refuge.

Some of you might know that at that service on Sunday evenings there are healing prayer ministers — lay people, you're out there now, who are careful, tender, generous people who are devoted to prayer. They will simply be with you, their hands on your shoulders, and pray in silence, prayer in company. I was desperate that night. Fearful, beaten, and trembling. The minister whispered to me, "what do you wish to pray about?" and I said, "I am abused." She asked if I had somewhere to go that night and I did, thank God. And then she said, you are safe here. And I had never felt more sure of God's presence as when this woman whose name I will likely never know and whose face I would not recognize now laid her hands on me and said nothing more than that: you are safe here. It felt as divine a touch as if I had touched the hem of his garment myself and in that moment, though it would be months before I left that man for good, for that moment I was healed. In many ways, it was the beginning of a new life.

Hearing the gospel today I have never believed so strongly that we were made for exactly this: divine touch and truth-telling. When Jesus sent his disciples out to heal others, he promised they would do even greater things than he had done and I believe it. It is a joyful story this morning but it is not without suffering. It could be that this story is a call to action. And it comes with big questions: what are we willing to do to heal, what are we willing to risk by stepping out in faith, laying down our fear, and speaking our truth. We give to God our shame, our despair, and our terror and in turn we receive God's mercy and grace. Pain may often precede miracle, and trauma precede healing but just look at what is possible even in the darkest hour when we turn to God in hope. I know that God is among you, and especially you, whoever you are, who touched a humiliated woman and told me I was safe here.

It isn't just that we *can* be a divine presence for one another; I am convinced we already are. It is our privilege and our responsibility to act like it. And we can always do better. So let us begin.

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