

**A Sermon by the Rev. Claudia C. Schmitt, Pastor
Wheat Ridge Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
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Daring to be Healed

Mark 5:25-34

Whether it is an acquaintance, a family member, or possibly your own experience, everyone here has been impacted by a chronic illness, disease, or condition. The CDC defines Chronic Disease as a long-lasting condition that can often be managed but not cured. The agency reports that chronic disease is the leading cause of death and disability in the United States. It accounts for 70% of all deaths in the U.S., which is 1.7 million each year. As of 2012, about half of all adults—117 million people—had one or more chronic health conditions. One of every four adults had two or more chronic health conditions. The CDC list such chronic illness as allergies, Alzheimer's disease, asthma, breast cancer, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, epilepsy, glaucoma, obesity, and heart disease, to name just a few.

My own childhood was shaped by the shadow of my mom's chronic mental and physical illness. My mom suffered from an undiagnosed psychological and physical malady that caused her chronic fatigue, depression, and pounding headaches. My mom told me that at about the age of 16 she developed a dull and constant throbbing in her head that never ebbed. It was there when she went to sleep, it was there when she woke up, and it was with her throughout each day of her life. Her chronic illness left her listless, anemic, and depressed. She went to numerous doctors and tried numerous remedies, but she never did find relief. It saddens me to this day. She lived her life thinking that she was possessed by a demon. Chronic illness can be devastating and profoundly impact on those who experience it and those who care for them.

Our scripture reading this morning is about a nameless woman with a chronic illness. The scripture begins with, "There was a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years." If we unpack this sentence we can surmise a great deal about this woman. We know that she has suffered for a long

time not only physically but spiritually, emotionally, and socially. We know that with this condition this woman is an outcast, ostracized and undoubtedly continually subjected to humiliating rejection. She would be considered unclean and defiled because of the strict Jewish cleanliness laws. All women who were menstruating were subjected to a multitude of rules and regulations that are outlined in Leviticus. It was forbidden to touch a menstruating woman. If one did, even accidentally, one would be considered unclean and must undergo a seven-day ritual purification. As she had been bleeding for twelve years, her life would have been lonely with very little social contact. Physically, she was probably anemic, tired, and lethargic. She was infertile with no prospect for a family of her own.

Her religious life would be hindered. She would not be allowed to enter even the woman's sector of the synagogue or participate in religious ceremonies. Either she or her parents, or both, would be blamed for her condition and perhaps told that it was God's punishment for something they had done. She would also have to bear the burden of knowing that her parents and siblings, if she had any, were also stigmatized because of her condition. Then on top of this, she had to deal with the unpleasant task of managing her bleeding on a daily basis. So, this one sentence presents us with a pretty bleak existence. But it gets even worse with the next sentence. "She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all she had." We can see that she is desperate, that she has used all her resources, and perhaps her parents have spent all they had in order to help their precious daughter—but instead of getting better she gets worse.

Now it may surprise you, but I have to tell you that after reading and reflecting on this story, this unnamed woman has become a kind of heroine for me. She is an amazing woman! Despite the cultural barrage of scoffs and scorn she most likely experienced, she is not a victim or helpless waif. She

is rather undaunted, honest and daring. Here is a woman who, despite everything that is wrong with her, does not succumb to the cultural labels that would tell her she is unworthy and unclean. Here is a woman who, despite her debilitating condition, does not become immobilized and helpless. Here is a woman who dares to disobey cultural norms, who dares to go out in public, who dares to risk everything for the belief that there still might be relief for her condition. Here is a woman that despite the public and personal shame she has endured for years somehow believes that she deserves to be healed, and even dares to be healed.

The American Psychological Association has sponsored two studies that were conducted on women who received a diagnosis of breast cancer. One study found that women who felt resigned to their fate were psychologically less well adjusted three years later when compared with women who actively confronted their diagnosis. Another study of women with breast cancer found that those who sought social support and used active coping strategies—such as developing a plan of action—reported more inner peace and satisfaction with life two years later, compared to women who tended to deny or avoid their diagnosis.”

Eleanor Roosevelt said, “You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do.”

Our unnamed heroine is one who is willing to do the one thing everyone in her society would tell her not to do. She is able to look her fear in the face. Perhaps it is because she has faced it so many times already, but she refuses to be resigned to her fate. She proactively develops a plan of action. And what is her plan? She is going to move unnoticeably through the crowd, and as soon as Jesus passes by, she is going to touch his clothes. She says to herself, “If only I can touch his clothes, I will be made well,” and I will get my life back. No one even has to know.

To give this passage a little more perspective, let me remind you of what Jesus is doing at this point. Jesus has been traveling by boat to various communities around the Sea of Galilee. He has left Geresá where he cast out demons and has just arrived on the shore Capernaum. The people seem to know he is coming to their village, because the crowds have already gathered on the shore. He is barely off the boat when a synagogue

leader named Jairus immediately beseeches him to save his beloved little girl. Jairus falls at the feet of Jesus, begging him to save his daughter. Jairus is utterly desperate and anguished, and Jesus, filled with compassion and kindness, agrees to go with Jairus to his home. As they are heading toward Jairus’s home, the crowds are surrounding him, pressing in on him. They are slowing him down so he isn’t moving quickly. It is at this point that our unnamed heroine enters the scene.

She wiggles her way through the crowd. She is likely faint but filled with hope, bleeding but dogged, terrified but filled with belief. No one has given her permission and she certainly can’t ask for it, but she doesn’t need permission. She has an inner conviction that for all her suffering, all she needs is to touch him—and it will be the most significant, life-changing event of her life. No one will know if she simply touches him. It will be her secret. Now imagine this for a minute. The moment has arrived and Jesus is almost within reach. She stretches her arm as far as she can and is able to grasp his cloak. Instantly, she can feel her body heal and come alive with energy and wholeness. Her bleeding has stopped and she has claimed her miracle. It worked! She can now just quietly go home.

But immediately Jesus stops, turns around, and says, “Who touched my clothes?”

Now obviously, as it was a large crowd, other people most certainly would have touched him as he walked along; but this was different. Jesus felt power leaving him. Jesus didn’t plan this miracle but he feels it happen. And so even now, when we reach out in vulnerability and honesty, there is a sense in which God feels us, feels our vulnerability and our need. Jesus’ response is interesting. Jesus isn’t angry; he is astounded, and wants to know who’s the faithful one in the crowd. He demands to know, because people need to know what faith looks like. Faith should be seen not hidden. But imagine her chagrin. She is exposed, she has dared to touch man, a great teacher and healer, and she has done it in a defiled state. It is disgraceful—but she doesn’t run away. She reveals herself. She falls at his feet. She doesn’t make excuses, she doesn’t deny it, she tells him the truth.

Then Jesus does what Jesus does best. He loves her, he has compassion for her, he affirms this woman and calls her “daughter.” She is one of his

family now. She has been transformed by faith. She has been healed not because he sought her out but because she dared to be healed.

We all have chronic conditions of some sort of another. They don't have to be physical. We all have conditions that keep us from living into our calling, from living as creative and whole human beings. We are chronically controlling or chronically worried, chronically fearful or chronically sensitive, chronically negative or chronically fussy. We all have chronic patterns of perspective and attitudes that keep us from living fully and that keep us limited in what we are called to be and do in life. Michael J. Fox said, “I often say now I don't have any choice whether or not I have Parkinson's, but surrounding that non-choice are a million other choices that I *can* make.” We are called to be initiators in our healing and when we do, the whole universe shifts, ever so slightly.

In June of 1966 Senator Robert Kennedy visited South Africa. This was at a time when that nation was experiencing upheaval over apartheid. Robert Kennedy gave a speech about racial issues at the University of Cape Town. He said, “It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

Our unnamed woman who bled for twelve years was healed because she dared to believe that she was worthy of being saved; she was healed

because she was strong-minded enough to make her way in a public place, surmounting the collective voices of her society which called her unclean. She was healed because, despite her tired wretched state, she was able to push through the crowds and steal a little miracle for herself.

I propose to you that the mere act of her finding healing for herself lifted those who were around her, also.

Mark 6 toward the end of the chapter we read, “When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.” Isn't this surely a ripple effect of the woman who bled for twelve years and dared to be healed? She had so much faith that the word had spread. People were now only asking to touch the fringe of his cloak. Our unnamed woman created a ripple effect—a ripple of hope, a ripple of faith, a ripple of courage, that ripples even today as we worship together.

That one little story and that one woman have so much to teach us! When we dare to face our fears and push through them anyway, a ripple is created. When we refuse to succumb to both the inner and outer disparaging voices that tell us we are victims or that we are hopeless, we create a ripple effect. When we dare to be healed, our healing is not only for ourselves. It lifts all humanity. Can we have dare to believe as she believed? Can we dare to be healed?