

See and Know and Love
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Sunday, June 27, 2021



Mark 5:21-42 NRSV

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat[a] to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. 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." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. 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, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" 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; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing[b] what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Good morning, beloved church community. Before I begin my sermon this morning, I have a little note about the topic of today's sermon. As you may have noticed, the Scripture for today references a woman bleeding, which is usually read as some kind of menstrual disorder. If references to menstruation make you uncomfortable, please note that this sermon will talk about menstruation and reproductive health for people with uteruses. And, if you or a loved one have a traumatic history with reproductive health, please take care of yourself during this sermon, and feel free to reach out to any of the pastors to check in.

Also, you may notice that my language is kind of clunky when talking about these topics. I try to use gender-affirming language. Part of that is saying “people who menstruate” and “people with uteruses” instead of “women.” Not all people who have uteruses and who menstruate identify as women. Transgender men may also have uteruses or menstruate. That does not make them any less of a man. Some people who identify as gender-non-conforming or nonbinary may also have uteruses. And, transgender women are women, no matter if they have uteruses or have ever menstruated in their lives. Not having a uterus does not make anyone less of a woman.

However, when referencing the Scripture, which says “woman,” and medical studies that study cis-gender women, I will use the word “women.” I encourage you to be careful in your language too, especially about gender. If you’d like to talk more about gender-affirming language or if you hear me make a mistake, please come talk to me. I would appreciate learning from you and with you.

One of the hardest things for me about the last sixteen months has been the lack of physical affection. I know that’s not everyone’s love language, but hugs and handshakes and pats on the back have been important to me. It has even seemed that people are afraid of each other, not only taking steps to move around people when encountering them on walks but also not even meeting each other’s eyes in greeting. As the pandemic progressed, we stopped hugging and hand-shaking and high-fiving, then we stopped going out on the bus or train, then we stopped going to restaurants and then we stopped leaving home all together. Of course, many people did not have the luxury of working from home or staying in all the time, and instead clothed themselves in items to be immediately discarded upon returning from work at the end of the day, so as not to introduce any molecules of coronavirus into their homes.

As I begin to spend time with people outside my home and am very slowly changing my mask-wearing habits, I find it even more challenging how fearful many have become of physical touch and closeness. I wonder what kinds of touch others are comfortable with, and even what kinds of touch I feel comfortable with, and I search for the right words to use to talk about comfort and consent and closeness. This is one aspect of the pandemic that certainly will, and is already, change everyday interactions moving forward.

Humans need touch. Touch is a language of its own, conveying things from affection to empathy to respect. Multiple studies show that humans need touch throughout their whole lives--from the physical affection that conveys safety and belonging as an infant to the accompaniment of elders by hand-holding in their last moments of life.

As I talk about touch and physical closeness, I want to be clear that I am talking about consensual touch. Also, different people need different amounts of physical connection. And in this world that is slowly regathering in-person in public places, it is more obvious than ever that we need to ask for consent before touching people. It doesn’t have to be awkward! Simply say, “Are you open to a hug?” or “I’m fully vaccinated, may I give you a high-five?” and if you’re not open to touch, for any reason, say “I’m not comfortable touching right now. Can we wave at each other instead?”

When people do not have welcome, meaningful touch as part of their everyday life, feelings of isolation and depression increase, and people can even become aggressive. Throughout the pandemic, particularly towards the beginning of the pandemic when we were learning day by day how the

coronavirus worked, the warnings against contamination via touch brought up traumatic memories from the most intense days of the AIDS epidemic. And still, though advances in immunology and epidemiology have been made at breakneck speeds to manufacture COVID vaccines in less than a year, a vaccine for HIV and a treatment for AIDS has not been found.

Scientifically speaking, consensual physical touch has the ability to lower heart rate and reduce the prevalence of stress hormones in our bodies. This happens on a molecular level, as the building blocks of life within our very bodies respond to stimulation. Theologically speaking, touch can be healing, as we read in our story from Mark 5.

An unknown woman, hemorrhaging blood, who has sought help over the course of her 12-year ailment, who has exhausted her financial resources on doctors who have not been able to help her. She is at the end of her rope, she is close to giving up hope, when she learns Jesus will pass through her region. She goes to him, thinking desperately to herself that any closeness to him will do, will make a difference, even touching the tips of the fringe on his robe. So she reaches out, hope against hope, craving the touch that she is sure will make her well.

Many scholars read this woman as suffering from extreme vaginal hemorrhaging, relating to her reproductive capability and status. Though the hemorrhage being related to menstruation is not explicitly stated in the text, the shame and alienation that can accompany ailments relating to reproductive organs resonate even today. People with periods are disenfranchised across the world: young people miss school because of lack of access to menstrual hygiene products. During this pandemic, the Period Project surveyed students about access to period products and found that over 20% of students struggled getting menstrual products due to doing school from home, when they would normally get products at school. In many states in the USA, the so-called “tampon tax” qualifies menstrual hygiene products as “luxury” items instead of essential items, taxing them at higher rates. Doctors routinely dismiss women’s pain as less important than men’s, and Black, Indigenous and Women of Color’s pain is even more dismissed and ignored, famously highlighted in the case of Serena Williams’ pregnancy complications. And then there’s the social stigma about people who menstruate being called hysterical or making rash decisions. PMS (premenstrual syndrome) is often the butt of jokes as well as being given as a reason for preventing people with uteruses not to be in positions of power, such as a mayor, a President, or a pastor.

Then, there’s Jairus’ daughter. The daughter lays dying in a bed at home, and her father’s love prompts him to act desperately, running to Jesus for help. The people around Jairus say “your daughter is beyond help, she is lost to us, what good can Jesus do?” but Jairus doesn’t listen. His love propels him forward and he seeks restoration for his daughter. Jairus is a local religious leader, you can think of him like a deacon, someone who is high up in the community and well-regarded, someone who has it all together. Perhaps many of us would identify as a Jairus. And so when he reaches out to Jesus, we can imagine how challenging it was for him to admit he didn’t know everything and needed help.

The stories relayed in Mark’s gospel, especially ones about healing, are complicated. The healing miracles are often-cited reasons for dismissing Christianity as a religion, seemingly impossible stories because of what we know today about science, medicine, and mental health. And I’m sure that each of us can think of situations we have encountered where prayers for healing are not answered in the ways we had hoped. And in no way do I want to suggest that prayer is without power, because I believe deep in my heart that God always is present to our prayers. But Mark’s gospel also doesn’t give a lot of

specifics when it comes to healing miracles, and so interpretation is open for healing as acceptance of identity, restoration of relationships and reconciliation to community.

I think this is what we see here with the women in our story. Take the woman with the flow of blood. I think she has experienced so much physical pain and has spent twelve years focusing on finding treatment for her medical situation to no avail. Perhaps her relationships have suffered as she openly talked about her life situation and physical wellbeing, making people uncomfortable. And then, think of the young girl, at the edge of, or even beyond, death. A dream of a life lost at 12 years old. How blessed she was to have a parent advocate for her wellbeing.

You might be thinking, these are weird texts for Pride Sunday. What messages can we gather from these long-ago words?

The woman, disenfranchised and desperate, having spent all her money and most likely used to being in physical pain, reached out to Jesus, knowing him as a welcoming, affirming and healing presence. Through years of struggling physically and searching for doctors that understand her, the woman with the hemorrhage finds herself believing that even the slightest touch could heal her. Having no advocate, the woman moved forward in faith, claiming healing for herself. Today, many transgender people struggle with access to gender-affirming healthcare, forced to pay out of pocket for hormones and surgeries that affirm who they know they are in their heart.

Jairus, a local religious leader, stepped outside his comfort zone as someone who appeared to have it all together and sought healing and restoration for his daughter. Even when we, as individuals, or maybe even as our church, feel we have it all figured out, we encounter people and situations that call us out of our complacent comfort zones and into roles of advocacy for folks who are more or differently marginalized than us.

And Jairus' daughter, a young girl who lay dead, who people had begun to mourn, whose only advocate was someone who saw her and knew her and deeply loved her. Perhaps you have been in this kind of position, as others left you behind, mourned your identity or another life situation...and if so, I pray that you, too, had someone who saw and knew and loved you so much that they brought their care for you to the Holy. And may you know now, that these pastors and this church, are with you and support you and will advocate for you.

Beloveds, on this Pride Sunday, know that you are seen and known and loved by the God who created each and every one of us in Their image. So today, claim God's healing and welcoming for yourself. Even if you have been told you don't belong, even when you have been pushed to the margins or not allowed inside places of power or have experienced threats or violence. Believe God's claim that "you are good," and the blessings of being known and loved for your whole identity are for you.

Though these women go unnamed, their stories move us and we remember them, and we find ourselves in these stories. Similarly, we remember the stories, if not the names, of queer ancestors who made space for themselves when society wouldn't. We remember those who had to stay closeted to save their own lives, and those today who face similar situations. We remember those who died due to lack of medical care for misunderstood diseases, alone and without physical touch. We remember those who have declared their deepest identities proudly, triumphantly claiming their own wholeness and

proclaiming their existence as an act of resistance to powers and principalities that would mute their rainbow love.

Seattle First Baptist, on this Pride Sunday, how can we make this place welcoming of people's wholeness? Perhaps we can go beyond saying "I'm not THAT kind of Baptist" in the negative to showing who and how we are in how we behave every single day. In this congregation we have a history to be proud of in having been welcoming and affirming of lesbian and gay people and queer marriage for over 50 years. The question we have before us now is how do we move forward in faith together? How do we carry that proud history into the future, continuing what our ancestors taught us about welcoming, inviting, including and nurturing? Who is at the margins, suffering in silence or even crying out to be noticed by us? How do we not only spread wide the doors and welcome people in, but how do we go out and reach out and proclaim the gospel that invites and includes, following the One who calls us each to be our whole, authentic selves in the pursuit of justice through love?

In our Scripture today, Jesus stopped on his way to do a good thing to help someone in need. Someone who was misunderstood, perhaps felt on the edges of her community, whose body prevented her from living life fully. We read that Jesus' power was not diminished by the time spent healing the woman. When we keep the dignity of fellow humans in the front of our view, we seek to relieve each other's burdens. Jesus had time for this woman, and he saw her faith as she reached out in hope. And he had time for Jairus and his daughter, time to visit someone presumed past all help and restore her into life. Jesus has time for us as well, and we can have time to truly see, get to know, and extend love to others.

Beloveds, when Jesus says "your faith has made you well" and "*talitha kum*, get up," he is talking to us. He is encouraging us, this church, you and me, to rise up and be the people we are meant to be. He is encouraging us to reach out in faith, to seek not only healing but also restoration into community. To move forward to change our society so no one else will have to struggle in the ways we have. To advocate for those who are prevented from advocating for themselves. To see and know and love each other deeply.

Beautiful, beloved, rainbow church---may this ever be so.