



"Life Transformed/Transforming Life"

a sermon by

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First Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 130
Mark 5:21-43

Our New Testament lesson for this morning comes to us from the gospel according to Mark 5:21-43. “When Jesus had crossed again in the boat 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 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.”

Were you to visit any one of the hundreds of chapels around the world that have been founded by Mother Theresa or the nuns of her order, the Sisters of Charity, you would find one common denominator among all of them. In each of the chapels that serve as the place of worship for the countless ministries run by the Sisters of Charity, on the wall at the front of the worship space are the words, “I thirst.” There is no great mystery here—these are among the last words of Christ on the cross and so they are familiar to us, and certainly appropriate to be printed in a Catholic chapel, often, next to a crucifix. These were the words that were spoken when Christ felt the most abandoned, the most alone. But they are also printed there to remind those within Mother Theresa’s orders that they are called to satisfy the thirst of any traveler that they come into contact with, and to remind us to be attentive to the thirst within our souls. I wouldn’t have known any of this

were in not for an opportunity I had recently to travel to Haiti to study the Spirituality of Mother Theresa in some of the most desperate and impoverished circumstances where that very spirituality was forged. “They are also there to remind us,” one of the brothers in her order said to our group, “that Christ thirsts for us to come closer to him.”

There must have been a deep thirst inside that woman that day. A deep longing in her soul to be healed of her poverty. I say poverty, because the illness that she had been stricken with- the hemorrhage, or as some other translations say, the ‘issue of blood’ that had plagued her for 12 long years most likely had left this woman bankrupt in almost every possible way. This particular, very private issue for the woman made her perpetually unclean in the eyes of Jewish law, which meant that she could not go into the temple to offer sacrifice or prayers. She could, at best, linger in the outer courtyard of the temple- a castaway from the covenant community. She shouldn’t be touched- lest she contaminate another person and make them ritually unclean as well and so socially, personally, she would have been isolated and alone except, perhaps, for the company of a few good women who understood the feeling of being betrayed by the rhythms of the body in a world that wanted nothing of it. She’d spent all of her money on doctors, but her condition grew steadily worse and now she was completely broke. But suddenly before her, amidst a throng of spectators, was Jesus. She had heard of this miracle worker. And she had nothing left to lose.

It had to have been quite a spectacle- a huge crowd that clamored and gawked and moved as one giant mass with some urgency down the center of town. He’s going with Jairus, to heal this man’s daughter. This public official, one of the wealthier men in town. The chair of the board at the synagogue. This man is known by his name, the woman, only by her condition. They are clearly in a hurry, but there is more than one life on the line today, and the woman is so thirsty. Thirsty for healing, thirsty for life. Thirsty to be touched by any power that would have power over her impoverished condition and so she shoves her way through the crowd toward Jesus, compelled by the thought, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” And so she elbows her way close enough to pinch the hem of his cloak and immediately she knows that she is healed. But not only healed, she is transformed. Resurrected even to new life out of the social grave. In a split second everything about this woman’s world was different, with that brush of linen against her fingers- absolutely everything had changed for her. And now everything was going to change for everyone else around her as well. Something extraordinary had taken place here and Jesus knew it.

The question in a mob of a hundred seemed absurd, ‘who touched me?’ And with the dying 12 year old of a man of great influence at the other end of that dusty road, the hold up seemed down right outrageous. But something had happened here. Power had gone forth from Jesus and left a life transformed, but Jesus was in the business of transforming all of life. And so perhaps because he too was thirsty for transformation, perhaps because he knew that the world was thirsty for transformation, as a pastor of mine once pointed out, “in the crowd so full of gawkers and spectators, Jesus wanted to talk to the one who was reaching for something more. In a world where stereotypes were strong and boundaries weren’t to be crossed, Jesus wanted to call the shunned woman forward. He

wanted to point out his encounter with the nameless one that no one else would touch. In a world that never really changes when it comes to caring more about issues than about people, a world that thrives on abstract discussions at the expense of compassion, a world that finds it easier to keep suffering at a distance when those who suffer are nameless, a world that prides itself on having winners and losers while never hesitating to point out the different, a world that yearns for the absolute and the black and white, and the easy answer, a world that raises the act of turning one's back on someone in need to an art form, in just that kind of world, Jesus stopped. On his way to heal the daughter of a man most important, he held up the procession to show mercy on the very least important one in the crowd. Jesus wanted to stop and look into the face of the woman everyone else tried hard not to see."¹ and in doing this, he saw to it that the woman was not the only one in the crowd who would walk away from him changed. "Daughter, (he said) your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

"They are there to remind us to be attentive to the thirst within our souls." The brother in Mother Theresa's order had said to us. "And They are also there to remind us that Christ thirsts for us to come closer to him." Unlike the woman in our text, for far too long we have had the luxury of distracting ourselves from the symptoms of the thirst within our souls. But there does seem to be some nagging familiarity about her condition that we cannot ignore. Something that is indeed familiar in her thirst for healing, her thirst for the fullness of life. Her thirst to be touched by a power that would have power over her impoverished condition. That would transform the world as she knows it beginning within herself. I suppose that if we are honest with this story and with ourselves individually, as a church, as a society, we would see that in reality we too are sick and in need of healing. We are strangers who long to be invited in. We understand what it feels like to believe that everyone else belongs here but us. And we are hemorrhaging a need for power, control, personal justice, influence, and affluence that is keeping us away from being in true community with one another.

I wonder if we haven't become so accustomed to joining the crowds on the side of the road- craning our necks in hopes of seeing the sensation of a miracle, wondering and chattering about weather or not the Word of God is going to get to its destination in time to save some lives, that we have forgotten the very thing that drove the woman to her healing. That left her life transformed and that would begin transforming life around her. I wonder if we haven't lost sight of that singularity of purpose that says before you spend another dime, before you seek another minute of advice, before you hang up your hope after years of seemingly endless suffering, before you give up the downtrodden to their poverty, and the dying to their graves, seek after the source at all costs. Pursue Jesus Christ and him alone with all the energy that your anemic heart can muster and just watch what his power can do. "If I but touch his clothes (the woman said), if I but touch his clothes I will be made well," And she was healed.

Standing in the doorway of the chapel for the concrete hospital in Haiti where 6 nuns from the Sisters of Charity oversaw the care of about 60 malnourished, disabled, AIDS,

¹ From the sermon, "A Healing Within" preached on July 2, 2006 by Rev. Dr. David A. Davis, Nassau Presbyterian Church, Princeton, NJ.

and TB-ridden men, women, and children, those words, “I thirst” seemed to jump off of the wall. The sun outside the doorway was blistering hot though the inside of the chapel was dark and cool. Flies buzzed overhead as our group leader, Fr. Jacob and I stood contemplating those words, and spoke quietly with Sister Bridgette, a young nun about my age from Lebanon who had traveled around the world serving in Mother Theresa’s orders before landing here in Haiti. “Have you ever met Mother Theresa?” Jacob asked. And a wide grin broke out across the young woman’s face. “Yes, I have.” She said. “I was very young- only about 14- and nearing the end of my first year of inquiry into the orders. I remember being very sad because I had decided for certain that I was going to leave the sisterhood. I could not lead this kind of life. It was too hard and I just couldn’t stand it. Mother Theresa was passing through town the following day and all the sisters were to gather for prayer with her and to take a photograph. I remember being devastated. I was so ashamed and very, very sad. I had come so far down this path, and now I had to find a new direction. I didn’t belong here. When the next day came, I was very angry that I had to be a part of the picture. I just wanted to escape. If this was not where I was supposed to be, I didn’t want to even want to glance at her. I was so angry but I had to go. So we all lined up and, of course, because I am very short, they knelt me down on the very front row. Then Mother Theresa came into the room. They stood her right next to me, and she turned to face the camera. She did not look at me. She did not speak to me. She did not touch me. But I felt power. Power streaming off of her. Power flowing off of her and into me. It was like nothing I had ever known. And I knew for certain in that moment that I had to stay in the orders and dedicate my life to serving Christ forever.”

The power of Christ is for those who thirst. And our world is parched for a word about the healing waters of life. It is not our ceaseless efforts to cure ourselves that will draw the world to the Lord. It is not the way we consume our resources on stuff that we don’t need and that cannot provide us with what we are looking for. It is not the way that we plan and program ourselves to exhaustion until we collapse and surrender to God for lack of a better option that will compel the world to his side. It is not the way we exert control over every corner of our kingdom that will teach the people about the kingdom of God. It is rather the presence and power of Christ within that will transform our lives in such a way that the world around us cannot help but be changed. It is in the way we tend to the source. It is in the way we fight through the crowd of things pressing in to be sure we always have a hold of his robe that others will know that Christ is worth clinging to. It is in the way we are attentive to the thirst of our souls, and pursue above all else the one who thirsts for us to come closer to him that the people will learn of his love. A love that breaks down dividing walls and creates new communities that are defined by love. That desires the transformation of all of life according to his ways. That blesses those who seek something more. Who hears us in the depths and raises hope from the grave. Who draws our wandering spirits back to God, flings wide the temple and prison doors, and invites us to his table to rest.

After Jesus had stopped his procession, after he had turned, after the woman had been healed by her faith and her tenacious pursuit of proximity with our Lord, he gave her a

blessing. A blessing to the one who thirsts from the one who thirsts to be known,
“Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed.”

Sons and Daughters of God, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed.
Do not fear, but believe. Amen.