

Mark 5:21-43
(2 Corinthians 8:7-15)
Pentecost 4B

Wesley UCA, Canberra
10:30 service
1 July 2012

Touching the Hem

The first time I sang that anthem was at university in 1968; it had a profound influence on my own Christian commitment because of its reflection on the image of 'touching the hem' of Jesus as an act of worship as well as supplication. At the time I was certainly one who felt that I was struggling through barriers put up by veritable crowds of people, almost unable to reach out to Jesus, yet hopeful of touching him somehow. The words of this anthem have been one of my 'touchstones' of faith ever since, not unlike the little rock I was given at my ordination some years later and that I still carry in my pocket to the pulpit. [The references here are to the choral anthem, by Harold Friedell, the Gospel reading, and to the Children's Time in which I told the story of my ordination and the California beach rock that was given to me on that occasion.]

Today the story of the woman who touches the hem of Jesus' garment has been accompanied in the lectionary by one of the apostle Paul's most passionate calls to the church to "excel" in generosity, both spiritually and materially. So I hope we will do that very thing—excel in generosity—as we consider the meaning of this woman's story in the context of our own lives.

It was not so much her heroic effort to break through the crowds pressing around Jesus and almost blocking her from access or even sight of him; it was not even so much her finally successful touch of the hem of his garment, important though that was: No, her most courageous act was that she "*told him the whole truth*". [Mark 5.33] In doing that she exposed not only herself, but Jesus also, to the potentially violent and deadly reaction of the crowd; for she was among the most 'unclean' of all people of her time—more unclean than even the lepers or demon-possessed—and, by touching Jesus' clothes, she had made him unclean too. By law she could have been stoned to death on the spot, and Jesus with her. That they both left the area safely is testament to his generous grace and his positive influence on the gathered crowd.

One of the most important things to notice about this story is that Jesus does not appear to be concerned at all about the purity laws; he does nothing to protect himself and says nothing that questions the woman's actions or her motives. She would have been considered a vile sinner in her community, not only for her behaviour on this occasion but because she has this particular illness; any physical ailment this serious was always thought of as punishment for some dreadful sin in that historical context. Yet Jesus says nothing of her presumed sin, but only praises her great faith, even calling her 'Daughter' as he sends her away healed and whole.

Despite the fact that a version of this story appears in three of the gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), for nearly 20 full centuries the truth of the woman who suffered haemorrhages was rarely heard in church services, ritually deleted from almost all

lectionaries until the most recent revisions. I think the men on the lectionary committees (and they were all men, until recently) were reluctant to require male preachers (and preachers are still mostly men) to speak publicly about menstruation, or the complications that could arise from it, as though this naturally-occurring physical process was still abhorrent—just as 'unclean' in the 20th century as it was in Jesus' time. The reality is that preachers also find the placement of this story problematic, inserted in all the gospel accounts as an interruption to another much gentler, sweeter and less controversial story of Jesus as a healer (the healing of Jairus' daughter), which is an easier sermon text. And, besides all that, there's the fact that within the story itself the reaction of the disciples and crowd to the healing of the haemorrhaging woman is, shall we say, somewhat less than enthusiastic—and thus a bit embarrassing for the church to own up to.

Here no faithful friend brings the sick and bleeding woman to Jesus; here the crowd does not part to make her way easier; here not even the disciples notice what has actually happened; here there is no celebration after the momentous event. Here Jesus himself does not make the usual request that the healed person not speak of what has occurred, not even in Mark's gospel where Jesus is nearly always urging people not to tell anyone about miracles (as he does a few verses later concerning the daughter of Jairus). I think Jesus knew it was unlikely that anyone would speak of this particular healing; he was not unaware of the endemic fear, ignorance and prejudice at work here in this situation.

Endemic fear, ignorance and prejudice: Now there's something I know a thing or two about! I've endured everything from shunning to shock therapy to nerve-shattering death threats because of it—all of that coming from individuals, communities and institutions that called themselves 'Christian'. All this has always and only been because I'm not heterosexual. I purposely describe myself this way because the other self-identifying descriptions I could use (even those words that have rather lovely romantic allusions to classical literature) are, to my way of thinking, labels: labels designed to separate me from the rest of humanity and place me (and those like me) in some category of a distinctly lower form of life. But I'm not a label, not a category, and (so far as I know) not a lower life form either. I'm simply (one could say *merely*) not heterosexual—a naturally-occurring variation in life. It's not about what I do or even how I feel; it's just part of who I am.

And I'll dare to make it clear in the context of today's acknowledgement of my 25th anniversary of ordination that God has always known exactly who I am, including in the midst of call me to ordained ministry. And I've never lied to church about who I am; indeed everyone present at my ordination knew me well, and the validity of that ordination has never been questioned on either side of the Pacific. However, for almost all of my adult life I've cooperated with a 'don't ask, don't tell' culture that is ultimately soul-destroying. Sometimes I've been silent out of polite unwillingness to offend—and sometimes out of abject fear of rejection. Today I'm neither proud nor pleased with either reason.

I will be silent no more. I will tell *the whole truth*. This is not just because I'm of a mature age and retired—and therefore in a 'safer' position in church and society. It's because I have come to a point, in the context of what is being openly discussed in church and society, when remaining silent is not an option. I actually believe, as was affirmed in a recent order of service for this congregation, that “*Christ will always stand with the cause of justice, no matter what it costs or whom it offends.*” And I believe that same gender marriage *is* a just cause. Yes, I would have liked the opportunity, the choice, the joy of marrying my partner before she died, so I'll declare that amount of self-interest. But ultimately I am far more interested in the well-being of the church and our relationship with the wider human community.

The Church (and here I speak of the universal institution of which we are a part) does not have a particularly good record when it comes to social justice, at least not in our initial response to controversial issues. (In case you're wondering about my loyalty to the Uniting Church: I love the Uniting Church; it's a great little church; but being the best of a bad lot is no great honour!) We tend to be a lot like the crowd who hindered the bleeding woman's access and then failed to celebrate her acceptance. We usually only belatedly realise that we're meant to be more like Jesus, accessible and responsive, who simply gave her what she asked for. One good thing I'll say for the church, though: We're pretty good at repentance. We're good at repentance when we finally get the message we are in the wrong, but we're not so good about generosity in the first place.

We've been (at least initially) wrong about religious intolerance, wrong about racism, wrong about indigenous peoples all over the world, wrong about hierarchy and human inequality, wrong about war and violence. Need I go on? Heavens, we were even wrong about sexism, so how can we think for a minute that we're not also probably wrong about hetero-sexism?! Let's all of us—and the whole of church and society as well—face up to our shared '*whole truth*.'

We've been wrong about these and many other things because it's part of human nature to resist change. After all, the socio-religious rules about who and what was clean or unclean did not change in Jesus' human lifetime, despite his best and most dramatic efforts to change them. Not even the heart-rending story of an outcast woman's truly remarkable resilience and courage made those rules change for a very long time indeed, and in some parts of the world not even yet. But we need to remember and affirm that it is *also* human nature to learn, grow and change: to create change, to promote change, even to adjust to unwelcome change. Indeed, if the human ability to learn, grow and change did not exist, then Jesus' whole ministry (and mine, for that matter) would have been meaningless.

Most Australians not only approve of same gender marriage; they think it is inevitable. Like all those other “isms” of inequality and injustice previously mentioned, they expect eventual change, even in the church. But I have to ask: What are we waiting for? How many more generations of human persons have to tell us

their 'whole truth' before we really listen? How many more millions must crawl against the crowd, seeking to touch the hem of grace and hope, before we get out the way? How many more times do we need to hear the many stories of the grace and generosity of Jesus before we understand how to be more like him? How many more depressed and oppressed people who are *just not heterosexual* have to be bullied, bashed or killed or even take their own lives before we affirm that their lives are also worth our tears of penitence—and their love as precious as any of our own?

And when will we acknowledge with true celebration that the great Good News Jesus Christ, in its own *whole truth* is always this: God loves *all* of us!

As is so often the case, I think someone else said it better—this time in a letter to *The Canberra Times* written by Rev. Christopher Turner, Senior Minister of the Canberra Baptist Church. He says:

For me, the way of Jesus Christ is, in part, about breaking through social, moral and cultural barriers to our love for one another as human beings. Jesus was constantly getting into trouble for recognising and embracing the full humanity of those who had been declared ritually unclean by their society and religion. When we take up the opportunity to establish and affirm the humanity of another person who has been marginalised on the basis of fear and misunderstanding, then we find ourselves walking in the way of Jesus Christ. The opportunity that same sex marriage gives us as a community to affirm the love of same sex couples as an intrinsic element of their humanity should not be lightly set aside by Christians who seek to reflect the way of Jesus Christ in their lives and communities.

The rich and powerful Jairus, the impoverished outcast woman, the insensitive disciples, the selfish and demanding crowd, the reluctant and even resisting listeners, those who have already been rejected by religion and those who live in fear or anger because of its rejection, the proudly self-righteous and sternly judgemental, the confused and the all-too certain, you...and me: God loves *all* of us!

All that remains is for us to decide how we shall love each other.

Rev. Janis R. Huggett