

“Hemorrhaging”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Mark
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on July 1, 2018

In the young adult novel by Mackenzie Lee, *The Gentleman’s Guide to Vice and Virtue*, the character Felicity asks her brother, “What’s that face for?” He shudders. “Just thinking about all that blood. Doesn’t it make you a bit squeamish?” Felicity replies, “Ladies haven’t the luxury of being squeamish about blood.”

There is a woman in our text today who had been bleeding for *twelve* years and in those days, men were more than a little squeamish around women who bleed. The law, found in Leviticus 15, said this:

“When a woman has her regular flow of blood, the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean till evening. Anything she lies on during her period will be unclean, and anything she sits on will be unclean. Anyone who touches her bed will be unclean; they must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening. Anyone who touches anything she sits on will be unclean; they must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening. Whether it is the bed or anything she was sitting on, when anyone touches it, they will be unclean till evening.

The passage continues . . .

“When a woman has a discharge of blood for many days at a time other than her monthly period or has a discharge that continues beyond her period, she will be unclean as long as she has the discharge, just as in the days of her period . . .”

Some people are squeamish around blood. Plenty of people are really squeamish around womanly blood. This was not only true in biblical times, but has continued throughout history. Women in rural areas of Nepal, for example, are forced to stay in sheds or livestock huts during the duration of their menstrual periods. This treatment of menstruating women was only recently outlawed.

So imagine with me for a minute what it was like to be this woman who bled and bled and bled for twelve years, especially in a culture when women were regarded as unclean while bleeding. I wonder: had anyone touched her for twelve years? Imagine the bravery it took for this woman to touch Jesus’ garment. She wasn’t supposed to be touching anything! But she must have believed one of two things. Either she believed that she really wasn’t unclean the way people said she was, or she believed that Jesus’ power to heal was stronger than her power to contaminate.

If you are woman, even a modern one, you know that it’s not just the blood. It’s the cramps and the fatigue and the hormones that go with it. At youth camp, one of the youth said something about how she was cramping. Zach joked and said, “Me too.” She looked him straight in the eye:

“Is your uterus spasming?” There’s this line in the movie *Date Night* with Tina Fey and Steve Carrell where the two characters are escaping bad guys and climbing up a ladder, and Tina hollers out, “Everything you’re doing, I’m doing in heels! I just want you to know that.” If only we were a little freer to talk about our periods, that way we women could say, “Everything you’re doing, I’m doing with a spasming uterus! I just want you to know that!” I read a little poem this week by Carol Ann Duffy about a fictional woman whose husband who went for a walk and came home female. The wife in the poem writes,

At first I tried to be kind;
blow-drying his hair till he learnt to do it himself,
lending him clothes till he started to shop for his own.

Then he started his period.

One week in bed.
Two doctors in.
Three painkillers four times a day.
And later
a letter
to the powers that be
demanding full-paid menstrual leave twelve weeks per year.

Joking aside, imagine with me the pain the hemorrhaging woman lived with. Not just physical pain, but emotional pain too. Anyone who touched her was considered unclean. If she was constantly bleeding, that also means she wasn’t able to bear children. Imagine the loneliness. She’d been to doctor after doctor, and no one had been able to help her. Imagine the discouragement. Imagine the tenacity it took for her to show up at Jesus’ side after so many disappointing years. She must have believed one of two things: Either despite all evidence to the contrary, she somehow still believed she was worthy of healing, or she believed she had nothing more to lose, so she might as well risk one more disappointment. Either way, this was a woman who would not give up on herself no matter who else had given up on her.

Unlike Jairus, who repeatedly begs Jesus to help him, this woman believes that just touching the edge of God’s garment will do. Do you see how radical her belief is? She believes in a God who will want to heal her. She *still* believes in that God after *twelve years*. She believes mercy belongs to her. She does not, as Mary Oliver puts it, have to “walk on her knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.” She only has to brush ever so gently up against the divine, and that will be enough. Maybe what appears to be timidity (“If I but touch his clothes”) is, in fact, a boldness of belief. “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well,” and you get the impression she says this to herself. No one even hears the volcanic-sized trust rumbling in the gut of her, but Jesus feels the light touch of her fingers as surely as if they were lava. The text also says, “*She felt it in her body.*” Something sensory and searing passes between them, and considering that people all around were pressing in on Jesus, without him feeling anything out of the ordinary, that means the fire that passed between them wasn’t just about the divinity in him, it had something to do with the divinity in her too. As Jesus himself puts it, “Daughter, your faith has made you well.”

Do not forget that this woman, however unwittingly, is interrupting somebody else's miracle. Jesus isn't just goofing around when she reaches him. He is on his way to see a little girl, a very sick little girl, who needs him. This could not have made Jairus, the girl's father, very happy, that Jesus is stopping in his tracks to talk to this woman. But Jesus does not seem to think her an interruption or a distraction. He thinks her gentle touch is worth turning around and acknowledging. He must have believed one of two things: either someone with that kind of faith was worth knowing or someone with that level of suffering was worth noticing. Maybe it was both.

She's been bleeding for as long as Jairus' twelve-year old daughter has been alive. Jesus has compassion on them both. The text says while Jesus was still speaking, some people came from Jairus' house to report, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?"

Imagine for a moment you are Jairus. You've begged and begged and begged for Jesus to come, for what father wouldn't do the same for his daughter? Jairus is one of the leaders of the synagogue, so you know that his colleagues would have frowned on him for approaching Jesus. Jesus, the radical teacher they would soon seek to crucify. Was Jairus risking his career by seeking Jesus? But what parent wouldn't do anything to save their child? Perhaps he expected Jesus to dismiss him as one of the hypocritical religious leaders, but regardless of what might happen, Jairus went and Jairus humbled himself and begged.

Imagine the urgency he felt. The sheer panic. "My daughter is at the point of death," he said, falling at Jesus' feet, and I can see him waiting in desperation and choking back the tears. *Please, let's set our differences aside. Just help me.*

Jesus comes and follows him home. Imagine the urgency Jairus still felt. The anxiety. The wishing and the hoping against the odds. It says a great crowd had gathered. I imagine Jairus pushing his way through, trying to clear a path. I imagine the crowds pressing in. They had arrived from all over to hear Jesus speak, and before he had even begun he was leaving them. I imagine all the people who wanted a glimpse of him, who wanted to reach out and touch him. Jairus is crazy desperate to get Jesus to his house before it is too late, when suddenly Jesus stops. "Who touched my clothes?"

Seriously, Jesus? We're wading through a mob and you want to know who touched your clothes? Come on! Keep moving. We've got to go.

But Jesus must have believed one of two things: either that the power of God wasn't on the same time table as Jairus or that this woman was worthy of attention too. And so he stopped. But in the time it takes for Jesus to converse with the woman, Jairus' daughter dies. I think of Martha when Lazarus dies saying to Jesus, "Lord, if only you had been here, he would not have died." I think of Jairus in that moment, receiving the news. I think about how his heart must have stopped, how the pain was enormous. I think of the defeat he felt; I think of the blood draining from his face. The shock. The sorrow.

But Jesus is not deterred. “Do not fear; only believe,” he says, and continues on to Jairus’ house. I imagine Jairus following him in grief-stricken stupor because he doesn’t know what else to do.

When Jesus arrives at Jairus’ house, he says, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead, but sleeping!” And they laughed at him. Poor, silly Jairus, for thinking this lunatic could help.

Poor silly woman, didn’t she know it was past time to give up? What foolishness to keep hoping after twelve long years.

It seems to me we could dismiss these stories as fanciful fairy tales from an ancient time. Then again, some of us know how it feels to wait for a very long time. Some of us know all too well the temptation to give up. Some of us know the desperation of being a parent. Some of us know the grief of loss. Some of us feel we are living in desperate, disappointing times.

Maybe despite all evidence to the contrary, we keep believing this world is still worthy of God’s attention. Maybe we come to church to beg or maybe just hoping we might graze the edge of God’s garment. Maybe we come just barely believing. Maybe our stubborn little seed of faith is more powerful than we know. Maybe we feel timid but really we are brave. Maybe we feel dead inside, but really we are just on the verge of waking up. Maybe it feels like the faith is hemorrhaging right out of us, but maybe God sees us as most faithful. *Poor, silly church*, the people might laugh, but maybe, just maybe, God is still listening. Amen.