

Seventh Sunday of St Luke



The Hemorrhaging Woman (Lk 8:41-56)

WE LIVE IN A SPEED DRIVEN AGE. We look for faster ways to accomplish every task: in the office, in the kitchen, in the classroom. In our economy, speed is a source of competitive advantage. In the workplace higher speed means greater efficiency. Today “to build a better mousetrap” means “to build a faster mousetrap.”

As a result we are increasingly intolerant of slowness. Waiting becomes more and more difficult. If we encounter a long line in a store, a bank or a post office our impulse is to leave and come back later. Our relationships with others may be scarred or shattered by our impatience with others. Our impatience with ourselves can make it impossible for us to rejoice in or even accept life in the present.

While people with chronic illnesses or handicaps have health services available to them as never before, their greatest suffering today may be psychological: knowing that they must live with their affliction day in and day out without hope of deliverance. Some advocate suicide or mercy killing as a way out of this impasse. The Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland have decriminalized mercy killing in certain circumstances to give people a “way out” of their hopeless conditions.

In contrast we find the situation of the woman recorded in the Gospels whose hopeless condition exceeded anything prevalent in developed countries today. We are told that she had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. In the Torah any contact with vital fluids such as blood rendered a person ritually impure and called for the sufferer to be avoided. *“If a woman hemorrhages for many days not at the time of her period she shall be unclean as in the days of her period. Every bed that she lies on and every object that she sits on shall be unclean as in the time of her period. Anyone who touches her shall be unclean and shall wash his clothes and bathe in water and be unclean until the evening. When she is cleansed from her discharge, she must count off seven days, and after that she will be ceremonially clean.”* (Leviticus 15:25-28). Since this woman was still hemorrhaging, it meant that she could not have experienced any intimate contact for twelve years.

Christ Alone Brings Healing

In Mark 5:26 we read that her attempts at finding medical help had been as fruitless as they were financially draining. She had no hope until she heard of Jesus. She approached Him secretly to avoid defiling Him or being rejected by Him, but touching the All-Pure One cleansed and purified her. Contact with the Long-Suffering One ended her long suffering.

In the New Testament physical healings and other miracles generally

point to spiritual healing. Here the woman's illness and her healing contact with Christ direct our minds to reflect on our own spiritual condition.

Most Christians today look upon the idea of ritual impurity in the Old Testament manner as antiquated and not part of our spirituality. Yet, each of us is unfit for contact with the Holy One because we share a nature scarred by sin and subject to death. We need to touch the hem of Christ's garment for our broken nature to be restored.

For us who live in the time after Christ's resurrection the "hem of His garment," the physical realities which convey His divine power to us, are the Holy Mysteries. In baptism we rise with Him from the death of our broken humanity. In the Eucharist we become more deeply one with Him in His Body, the Church. We come to Him in the various circumstances of our life – our need for physical or spiritual healing, our desire to experience His blessing on our families and our ministries – seeking to be transformed by His presence. And when we approach the water, chrism, oil, or crowns with the faith of this unnamed woman in the Gospels we are touched by the power going out from Him through them as well.

The Mysteries as "Works of the Law"

It is all too easy for us, particularly those raised in the Church, to approach the Holy Mysteries as if they were acts of ritual cleansing as described in the Torah. We can bring our children for baptism because that's what we do with babies to "make them Christians." We can approach the mystery of confession legalistically, so that we can get a pass to receive the Eucharist. Approaching any of the mysteries as if they were rites of passage or ritual purifications – or as anything other than reaching out to touch the hem of Christ's garment – turns them into "works of the Law." And, as St Paul insists, "*by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified*" (Gal 2:16).

Our sacramental contacts with Christ are meant to affect our life. The Holy Mysteries are not simply "rites," ceremonial moments that we perform then return to ordinary life without their affecting the way we live. On the one hand we live and worship as Christians only because we have "touched" Christ. He alone is holy, He alone is Lord.

On the other hand we know that our baptismal union with Christ does not guarantee that we will live the life we have received. As with the woman in the Gospels, our contacts with Christ are simply part of the story. The way we live determines how the story develops and will end.

The Woman in Eastern Christian Lore

The Scriptures do not mention this woman again. A later work, the *Acts of Pilate*, gave her a name, Berenice, but this does not shed any light on how her healing affected her life. In the West this name was transliterated as Veronica, whose connection with Christ's passion was popularized in the Middle Ages.

The *Acts of Pilate*, parts of which date to the mid-second to third century, describe this woman as offering testimony at the trial of Jesus: "There was found there also a woman named Berenice, and she said: 'Twelve years I was in an issue of blood, and I only touched the edge of his garment, and directly I was cured.' The Jews say: 'Our law does not admit the testimony of a woman'" (*Acts of Pilate*, 7).

According to one tradition, Berenice caused a statue of the Lord Jesus to be made in gratitude for her healing, before which she prayed to God. The fourth century Bishop of Caesarea, Eusebius, described it: "Since I have mentioned this city [Caesarea Philippi] I do not think it proper to omit an account which is worthy of record for posterity. For they say that the woman with an issue of blood, who, as we learn from the sacred Gospel, received from our Savior deliverance from her affliction, came from this place, and that her house is shown in the city, and that remarkable memorials of the kindness of the Savior to her remain there.

"For there, stands upon an elevated stone, by the gates of her house, a brazen image of a woman kneeling, with her hands stretched out, as if she were praying. Opposite this is another upright image of a man, made of the same material, clothed decently in a double cloak, and extending his hand toward the woman. They say that this statue is an image of Jesus. It has remained to our day, so that we ourselves also saw it when we were staying in the city."

This statue was preserved up to the time of Julian the Apostate, when it was altered to become a statue of Zeus.

~ Office of Educational Services, Eparchy of Newton