

Proper 8B: Mark 5:21-43  
Good Shepherd Episcopal Church  
The Rev. W. Terry Miller  
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### A Touching Story

Jonathan Haidt in his book *The Righteous Mind*, notes that Westerners like us are distinguished by the lack of a strong moral sense that people in the rest of the world have—a sense of disgust. Other cultures have a much more developed awareness of and concern for things that are “dirty” or disgusting and have accordingly developed safeguards—taboos and rituals—to minimize exposure to them. The Japanese take off their shoes before entering their homes, lest they track dirt into living quarters. Indian women change their clothes, after using the bathroom, before they start cooking. Arabs use their right hands to eat, shake hands and pass things to others, because their left hand is used for, um, washing themselves.

The Ancient Israelites also had this sensibility, as evidenced by what scholars call the “Jewish Purity Laws.” According to Exodus and Leviticus, Israelites were not to eat or even touch certain ‘unclean’ animals like pigs and bats. Nor are they to have any contact with bodies that are oozing, flaking, bleeding, or dead. Now, on the one hand, this makes sense on a practical level; it aligns with the need to avoid pathogens, parasites, and other threats that spread by physical touch or close proximity. And we generally agree that it’s best to stay away from corpses, excrement, scavengers like rats and vultures, and sick people, lest we be exposed to things that would harm us.

But for the Israelites, this reasonable caution against contagion went beyond what we understand today as commonsense hygiene, veering into the realms of morality and religion. For the Israelites, to be “dirty” didn't mean “dirty” like an 8-month-old playing in the mud, but more like the phrase “dirty, old man.” The term carried with it a moral, relational, religious sense of being unclean. At its core, cleanliness for the Israelites had to do with being in right relationship to God. That is to say, being unclean was the opposite of being holy. Anything unclean was impure, unfit or unworthy to be in the presence of the holy God. If, for whatever reason, you became unclean, you touched a dead body, say, you had to go through a rite of purification or cleansing in order to be welcomed back into the community of God’s people, before you could enter into the presence of God again.

We might look askance at this behavior today. We generally don’t see eating pork or menstruating as having anything to do with our relationship with God. Such purity laws strike us as superstitious, the behavior of primitive people who did not understand disease, did not have “germ theory” as we have. But humans are humans. People today just have more sophisticated ways of justifying our feelings.

You can see this concern about impurity in Hitler’s description of Jews as disease-ridden vermin and how in the South blacks and whites had separate water fountains and bathrooms, lest the whites catch a disease from blacks, and how in the 1980s church members refused drink from the common cup, for fear of catching AIDS, even after it was clear that AIDS only spread through bodily fluids. Or if we are brave, we might consider how we reacted to Covid just a few years

ago. We all kept away from each other, isolated ourselves from others, closing churches and other meeting places, kept six feet away from each other when we had to go out to stores, donning masks so we don't breathe on each other.

This was all necessary, we were told, to stop the spread of the coronavirus. Still, we cannot ignore the moral and social dimension of these behaviors. We treated each other as diseased or at least potentially diseased. And if you refused to go along with the prescribed precautions, you'd quickly find yourself subject to the full opprobrium of society. People who refused to 'mask-up' were looked at askance, decried as irresponsible, even malicious, for failing to uphold community behaviors. Some were even arrested for riding a bike or surfing at the beach, even though they were far from anyone else and could not possibly have endangered anyone. The anger, outrage and venom directed towards them went well beyond what was called for by an objective assessment of the risk they posed. They were judged to be morally depraved, a danger not just to public health but to the social order.

Please understand, I'm not denying the danger that Covid presented—I know some of you lost loved ones to the virus, some in our own congregations—Adrienne Hymes and Walter Welshman. My point is rather to show that, for all our sophistication and rationalizations, we are no different from more "primitive" cultures. We may not have as developed a sense of moral disgust as others, but we do have one.

The reason I bring this up is because issues of purity and uncleanness are at the forefront of our Gospel lesson this morning. The story opens when Jesus returns from the boat ride we read about last Sunday. He steps ashore and is immediately accosted by Jairus, a leader in the synagogue. The reason Jairus sought Jesus out is because his daughter is sick and dying and he wants Jesus to lay hands on her and heal her.

Jesus consents, but on the way to Jairus' house he comes in contact (literally) with a woman who, we are told, has been bleeding for twelve years. Mark doesn't say it, but her condition was probably of the sort that used to be euphemistically called a "female problem." According to ancient Jewish law, a woman is considered unclean for the duration of her bleeding. Which is bad enough for the normal, monthly cycle, but in this case, it meant she was unclean for twelve years! For twelve years, she has been impure, untouchable, unlovable—sick and smelly—disgusted with herself and with her body. And no one would go near her, lest they catch her condition. The woman had tried everything, sought out the best doctors she could find—such as they were at the time—but she received no relief. So when she heard that a miracle-worker named Jesus was in town, she decides to risk breaking the law and enter the crowd, exposing not only the townspeople but *the rabbi* to her impurity.

Her gamble pays off. Jesus heals her, though not exactly voluntarily. But when he finds out what she had done, Jesus *shockingly* doesn't get mad at her or admonish her for exposing him and others to her uncleanness; he instead calls her "daughter" and commends her for her faith.

Jesus then continues to Jairus' house, only to discover that his daughter had succumb to her illness and died. Which meant that the girl was now a corpse, which was also unclean, according to Jewish law. Nevertheless, Jesus takes her by her unclean hand and tells her to get up. And she

hops up and heads to the fridge for a snack. I guess dying and being revived can work up an appetite!

In both instances, the bleeding woman and the corpse girl, Jesus touched people considered unclean. He exposed himself to their disease, to contamination, and accepted the danger of illness and isolation that came with it.

It's important to note, though, that Jesus does not criticize the Jewish law, or proclaim the purity codes no longer in effect, or suggest in any way that health, wholeness and holiness aren't important for the people of God. Rather, by touching the bleeding woman and the dead girl, Jesus shows he won't let fear of contamination get in his way, won't let it stop him from showing God's compassion and power, because God desires to restore wholeness and health not just to individuals but to the community, to humanity, to the whole world.

Illness still often leads to isolation, even if today we don't treat the sick as unclean. But Jesus shows us being sick, unclean, impure doesn't cut us off from God. God reaches out to those who are ostracized, the sick as well as the sin-sick, the morally unclean and spiritually dead, to bring them back, to restore them in body and to restore them to the body of God's people. God does not forsake us in our illness and impurity, but has come to us to "infect" us with life and holiness.

If we find ourselves in need, outcast, in pain and sick, Jesus bids us to come to him for healing. I've known a number of people who have been healed through prayer, their own or more often the prayers of others—people who have been healed of backaches, infertility, brain tumors, lupus, cancer, even athletes' foot. It is God's work and it is amazing in our eyes!

At the same time though, to say that Jesus heals, that God wants to heal us, that doesn't mean that we can expect to be cured. For reasons beyond our understanding, some people who are prayed for are cured, but for others, healing comes in a different form: the healing of their relationship with God, their being brought back into the community or being reconciled with other important people in their life. Sometimes physical and social healing are related. I know of one woman who had a horrible backache, for which she sought healing prayer. But it wasn't until she forgave her brother, sent him a letter apologizing to him, that her backache miraculously went away. Healing comes in different ways, has different dimensions. But whatever form it comes in, it testifies to the power of God to bring wholeness.

Now, this story is obviously about Jesus and his mission, but it also says something about us, the church, and our mission. What this story tells us is that, like Jesus, we Christians are in the business of healing. It was Christians, often monks, in the Middle Ages who started the first hospitals, and in modern times, Christians have often been the ones who've started hospitals and clinics in needy places throughout the world. But even beyond involvement in formal institutions, the Church is to be a healing community, a community that heals, that touches those deemed untouchable, who provoke disgust in us, because of who they are or what they've done or what's been done to them, bringing them into relationship with others, with the community, with God.

Church history is full of examples of Christians giving sanctuary and succor to the sick and isolated: Fr. Damien, missionary to the Kalaupapa leper colony in Hawaii, the Xavier missionaries to the Dalit “untouchables” in India, Mother Theresa who ministered in the slums of Calcutta. Yet the witness that most impresses me comes from the early church. During plagues in the Roman Empire in the 2nd century, when pagans left the cities, abandoning their infected loved ones, Christians stayed to care for the afflicted, not just their own but all the sick. This was because they were not afraid to die, because they trusted in God’s assurance that death wasn’t the end. Many did die, but because of the way they cared for each other, Christians enjoyed a substantially higher rate of survival. Together, their witness, their willingness to risk death to care for the sick, and their higher rate of survival, impressed the pagans and led to the spread of the faith and ultimately to the conversion of the Empire.

I’ll tell you, I couldn’t help but think of the witness of these early Christians when we faced our own recent plague. I’ve wondered what kind of witness churches in this country could have made, had we followed the example of the early church and, instead of retreating to our homes during the lockdowns, we kept our doors open for anyone who needed to pray or just be with others, if we had sought out the lonely and isolated, if we had offered tutoring to students who were stuck at home. I don’t say this because I’m insensitive to the risks that Covid presented, particularly to older people. But because I am sensitive to the harms brought by our *responses* to Covid—years of lost learning among students, a mental health epidemic among young people, domestic abuse going unreported, people dying alone in hospitals, small businesses closed, ballooning national debt. I wonder what we Christians could have done to ameliorate those harms, what kind of witness would we have given if we had followed Jesus’ admonition to Jairus: “don’t be afraid, have faith,” what Jesus could have done through us, how many lives we could have touched, souls we could have healed.

I don’t know the answer to that question, but the question has stuck with me. Because we follow a Savior who wasn’t afraid of catching what others had, of taking on their weakness, bearing our sin, because he was determined to show God’s love, to spread grace. I wonder how we today might be carriers of this “good infection,” how we might spread his good “contagion.” For it’s not just disease that can spread; health and salvation can too. Thanks be to God.