

Risky Business: Mark 5:24-35

I have always admired the woman in our scripture for her initiative, courage and perseverance. She took such a great risk. She risked breaching cultural codes; risked not being healed once again; risked rejection; risked being noticed; she risked vulnerability. Through my own ministry journey, I have grown better able to also appreciate the risks that Jesus took in this encounter. He risked acknowledging that someone considered ritually unclean had touched him. He risked letting the crowd see his own vulnerability to touch. He risked slowing down and being affected. He risked hearing this woman's story. Yes, Jesus and this woman both model to us the risky business of following God.

In this story, we find yet another example of how Jesus modeled the importance of noticing others, particularly those whom his society undervalued, ignored or despised—whether it was Zaccheus in a tree, the little children who came before him, the woman at the well, those battling demons or leprosy or hemorrhages—Jesus took the time to acknowledge their presence and worth. He offered them attention and helped to remind them that they were not alone—that they, too, were a part of the human community. His capacity to notice and to acknowledge others demonstrated a type of compassion that relayed a concrete experience of God's inclusive, healing love. He also demonstrated that healing happens on many levels—not just physical. As humans, we don't have much control over physical healing—the miracle of physical healing remains a great mystery. However, in this story, Jesus models to us how we as humans can contribute to the healing of others. This woman needed more than physical healing after 12 years of suffering—she needed a balm for her isolation and sense of stigmatism. She needed acceptance—she needed to be heard. She needed a welcoming community to share in God's love.

My friend Gail shared a similar experience of this type of love with me after a terribly hard time in her life. After a difficult marriage, Gail and her spouse waded through an equally difficult divorce. Sadly, as a result of her divorce, the church in which she was raised condemned her. She was forced to leave that community disillusioned and broken. As such, she was riddled with shame and never dreamed that God or a church would have anything to do with her again. Remarkably and courageously, she moved on in her life. Even more remarkably, she risked reaching out to a different congregation. From that very first service, she felt herself embraced by this community. The people of this church felt her need and responded to it. With fear and trembling and courage, she risked sharing her truth with them—she shared her pain and from this church, she

Risky Business: Mark 5:24-35

received the great balm of God's healing love. In her thank you letter to them, she offered deep gratitude to the ministers who responded to her pain and affirmed her faith. Here is just a small portion of her thanks, which I share with her permission:

"I just want to say thank you to you all . . . for every smile, for every handshake, and for every hug . . . I have been eternally touched by your kindness . . . Thank you to those of you who listened to me, thank you to those of you who frequently stopped to ask how I was doing . . . thank you all for renewing my faith, for restoring my soul, and for introducing me to a love far greater than any of us can fully comprehend . . . this place is an indescribable reflection of the powerful love of our God." What a powerful account of healing touch—touch that was initiated by Gail and so compassionately responded to by this new community.

While Gail and the woman in our scripture reading today have their differences, I see great similarities in the painful isolation of their suffering, their courageous perseverance, and the willingness to take a risk by reaching out to another for healing. I also see similarities between Jesus and Gail's new church family—both risked taking the time to notice, welcome and hear her painful story. We know little about the woman in this story, but what we do know is that she showed initiative and courage. After 12 years, she continued to be a survivor and like my friend, she continued to hope for and seek healing. Her faith led her to draw close to and risk touching Jesus. As a woman, she was considered a second-class citizen and as a woman suffering from hemorrhages was considered ritually unclean. What great suffering and isolation she must have had and what great hope! What a great risk she took in touching Jesus, and in so doing, she drew God's great creative, healing power into her body and was physically healed.

And Jesus, who was so attuned to his own body that this woman's touch affected him, then took his own risk. He acknowledged the touch. How easy it would have been to have just stayed focused on the task ahead. You may remember that in this story in Mark that this woman reached out to him when he was on his way to heal a dying child—what could possibly have been more important? But he stopped—perhaps he knew this touch needed more than physical healing—perhaps he knew this person needed to tell her story. So, he took a risk. He risked slowing down. He risked revealing that unclean hands had touched him. After 12 years of being untouchable, this woman was not only offered the miracle of physical healing, but she was also granted healing through

Risky Business: Mark 5:24-35

being acknowledged and invited to speak. Instead of allowing this woman to slip silently back into the crowd to pick up the pieces of her own life, Jesus called her back into the human community—he asked for her to speak her truth, which she courageously did. And, he made sure she was heard. The community around her then had the opportunity to hear that she was no longer “unclean” and untouchable in community, but an example of faith to be honored. Through her physical healing and her story telling, she experienced grace and became both a witness to and an example of God’s healing, inclusive love.

This story is a good reminder what of we each need in our own suffering and what we can humanly offer to others in theirs. Jesus and this courageous woman model to us a form of healing which risks touching and being touched. They tell us that reaching out for healing is an act of courage and faith. They also tell us that remaining aware of this need, even when we’re on the way to somewhere else, and inquiring about it is, in itself, an act of healing. While physical cure may be out of our individual hands, receiving and noticing someone’s need for acknowledgement and care is not. What this story tells us is that the most basic and powerful gift we can offer another who reaches out to us is to acknowledge their initiative—acknowledge how they have touched us and respond compassionately. It also reminds us that a compassionate response includes offering a space where one can be heard and affirmed.

I believe that we, as church, are called to be a part of this risky business of modeling acceptance and welcome to those in need of healing. Of course, there are so many ways in which we already do this—particularly among our members and our outreach projects. However, I imagine there are areas in which Jesus might call us to take more risks—to open our hearts and our doors to those who stretch us—to those who feel risky, but who also might become great witnesses of faith—those who might then shape and transform us—who might teach us about what it means to be a person of faith.

As I was writing this sermon, I was drawn to a story in the headlines this week about the execution of Troy Davis. I’m sure many of you may know this story. In short, this is a man who had been on death row for nearly 20 years in Georgia for killing a police officer who was working off duty as a security guard. There had been many stays of execution and the case went all the way to the US Supreme court. Over the course of these 20 years, 7 of the 9 witnesses who testified against him recanted their testimony and there has never been any

Risky Business: Mark 5:24-35

physical evidence that linked him to the scene. Davis has consistently claimed his innocence. In light of all these doubts, there has been a great uproar that an innocent man may have been executed. My heart has been heavy about this tragic possibility and this probably is the topic for a whole different sermon. However, I don't know how many of you heard this, but I was also incredibly moved by his expression of faith just prior to his death. His final words to his executioners were as follows: "For those about to take my life, God have mercy on your souls. And may God bless you souls."—may God BLESS your souls. For me, this seems to be an incredible witness of faith from a man who is about to be executed for murder—whether guilty or innocent, but particularly if he's innocent—to request a blessing from God on those who are participating in a system that are about to take his life. Imagine—I don't know if my faith could stand such circumstances. I don't know if my faith could withstand suffering from a condition for 12 years that designated me as untouchable. I don't know if my faith could withstand being shunned and condemned by the church that raised me. Troy Davis, the woman with hemorrhages, and Gail each demonstrate the perseverance of faith in seemingly hopeless times.

You know, it must have felt quite risky for those who took up Troy Davis' cause and reach out to him—a potential murderer. It could not have been easy to risk developing a relationship with this person and advocate for his innocence or, at the very least, a reduced sentence. Now, we may never know the full truth of the Davis story, but what we do know is that a community of people did reach out to Troy Davis and offer him acceptance and love—it was risky business—after all, they did not succeed, he is dead, and their hearts are now broken. However, they offered him grace and if I can take any comfort in this story it is that Troy knew he was not alone; that people risked reaching out to him and risked caring; that people shared in his suffering—that he had community—that he knew he was loved and now he is in God's hands. Is this not what we are called to do as Christians—to seek out those in need of healing and offer them welcome? To risk being affected by someone whom the culture describes as untouchable or unworthy? To share God's love with the least of these? Now, perhaps welcoming someone like Troy Davis is an extreme example of the risky business of being a Christian. But I do challenge us as a church to reflect on whom it is God does call us to take risks with? Who pushes us beyond our comfort zone? To whom are we called to listen, welcome and offer grace? You know, we have much to feel good about. We are already welcoming new members who bring great diversity and talent into our midst. We are already taking risks, whether we realize it or

Risky Business: Mark 5:24-35

not. We are doing Christ's work. And, I invite us to continue this conversation. Where is our passion for living into Jesus' example? To what risky business are we called?

Mike and I are familiar with a congregation in Nashville, TN that has undertaken incredible risks. Their mission is as follows: to reach out to and welcome all persons as they are, in the name of Jesus Christ; to nurture one another in our relationship to God and in the Christian faith and life; and to go out as agents of God's transforming love to make our neighborhood and the world a place of justice and compassion. Some of their ministries include an afterschool tutoring program that provides a safe and nurturing place for children who live in the housing projects close by; they open their doors to individuals living with mental illness and substance abuse issues. When we were there, they fought to keep a neighborhood grocery store open so that this community had access to healthy food choices. That church refused to accept cultural norms and consistently worked to make sure those who were hurting in their neighborhood had a welcoming space within their walls. You know, going to church there was and is an experience—you never knew whom you might end up beside. And honestly, it wasn't always comfortable, but I always left feeling that God was at work in all of us there. I always felt that those who pushed me beyond my comfort zone in that setting also served as examples of a faith I could only hope to live into. Now, our community is not their community—we have our own risky business to live into and only we, as a church, can figure that out. What I do know is that there are people close by who are hurting, who are in need and who might even teach us a few things about being a Christian.

Simone Weil once said, "The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle." Jesus offered the woman with hemorrhages a miracle by not only healing her but also by acknowledging her suffering. Gail's new church community offered her a miracle by listening to her painful story and the community which fought for Troy Davis offered him this miracle by sharing a part of his journey. My hope is that we as church can find ways to continue to offer these miracles to those whom our society wants to turn away but whom Jesus calls us to listen. I have great faith that we can, that we already do in our own ways, and that we can find ways to do it better. Amen.