

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost: June 27, 2021

“Healing Womanhood”

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Good morning everyone. I just wanted to comment on last Sunday with our Bishop. What a wonderful service! Thank you, everyone, for being there. And with that, I have a very interesting reflection, more like a quick Bible study on our hemorrhaging woman and why this story may appear where it does, sandwiched between another request for female healing.

First, we must understand that, as biblical scholar Mary Ann Tolbert explains, “In the ancient world, illness and disfigurement were most often thought to be visited upon people by evil or demonic spirits who inhabited all corners of the human world.” Tolbert goes on to say that for the author of Mark, the fact that Jesus has absolute power is shown over and over again. Power over nature and the storm, the ability to cast out demons and also perform miraculous healings, even power over death.

Another component to the Gospel of Mark is that in each instance faith is brought to the forefront. “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” “Do not fear, only believe.” Now I have no doubt that Jesus did wander the countryside healing people, however, when it comes to scripture, and if you believe it is inspired by God, you have to wonder about all the other dimensions that might be tucked away right before your eyes.

As I pondered the story of the bleeding woman, and knowing what I know about the purpose of scripture for the Hebrew people of Jesus’ time, I recognize that there is always a code; i.e., a hidden message that mostly only the Jews understood at the time.

Mark through his Gospel shows that there are four ways to respond to Jesus. The first response is to not hear Jesus; being deaf to the message of love and compassion as the Pharisees were stuck in their tradition. Second is to deny Jesus, as the disciples did when really put to the test, i.e., a half-hearted faith. Thirdly, those who refuse to accept and live into the message after having heard it; as did Pilate allowing the crucifixion to happen rather than ruin his popularity or reputation. And fourth, the last way is to respond with humility, trust and faith. This is the fertile ground that brings forth healing and abundance from God, as represented by our women today.

Several weeks ago, one of the readings from John contained the words, “we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews.” The Gospel of Mark contains the responses to this opportunity for salvation. Never forget, these stories were written to and for the Jewish people after Jesus’ death and resurrection and they serve a purpose.

So the code is salvation, the message of God working in our lives. Every Old Testament story contains sin, repentance, judgment, possible forgiveness and eternal salvation in some form of an ever-spinning circle. With that in mind I would like to examine today’s scripture in light of the “female problem.” In our reading today, it is the women who are responding in faith and receiving healing. They have found salvation in the fourth way to respond to Jesus. The way of humility, trust and faith.

Knowing what we know about the culture of that time, we can come to the conclusion that our hemorrhaging woman could be linked to a curse or evil visiting her or possibly a sin she or a family member committed, which within the tradition could even consider going back to Eve in the garden. Cursed as a female.

And again, in today's story this bleeding woman is going to take things into her own hands. She is going to sin: she is going to steal something from Jesus; take something from God. And she is going to do it of her own free will in secret. Not unlike Eve taking the apple. For our hemorrhaging woman, she has nothing to lose at this point, having spent all her money searching for a cure. She is now banished from most of society as her illness makes her unclean, thus she has no standing within the community. But unlike Eve with Adam, who tried to hide from God and then was banished from the garden and cursed forever, she reverses the story. She does not run and hide from God, instead, she humbly confesses.

Unlike Eve, she is not cursed by God, when she is confronted by Jesus, but forgiven. Once the woman was healed she could re-enter society. Jesus has cleared her of her shame and she could now take on her proper role due her in the male dominated world. For the readers of Mark, but in particular to the women of the first and second century (a time when to be female was to be property and sometimes unclean) and also to be Jewish was to be forever tied to Eve; this is Gospel. This is good news.

This proclaims that even a female within the eyes of God could have faith and be forgiven, be healed. In other words, she could have worth and cultural relief from an ancient curse. For those who recognized the authority of God in Jesus, the relationship between tradition and rules versus personal relationship to God has now been completely turned around.

Interestingly enough, this bleeding woman and her healing are sandwiched between the raising of a dead child back to life. Just in case there was any doubt as to who Jesus really was. Just in case you thought he did not have the authority to scourge the age-old female curse we have Jesus defy death - the ultimate price for sin.

Interestingly enough, the bleeding woman was ill for twelve years and the young girl is also identified as twelve years old. Anyone who understands biology can see the significance of the girl – which is so clearly defined in the scripture, as Jesus states, “Little girl, get up!” Which again is an acceptance of a girl on the brink of womanhood.

Basically, what this Gospel is stating is “Women’s Lives Matter”; to steal a phrase. Jesus is accepting of female child and grown woman. He recognizes their worth, their faith and even calls both of them “daughter.” He gives them a place in the kingdom of God, and a standing in the less worthy place of the Roman/Greco Jewish society. By modeling inclusion Jesus is tearing down the ancient model of connecting women with evil, sin and curse by using its very own traditions in an ever-widening acknowledgment that God loves all of us.

It is strange to think that it has been two thousand plus years since this scripture we believe to be inspired by God showed clearly that women are important, accepted and part of the beloved creation and community. Yet there are still so many women struggling today with shame, abuse and poverty. So many who even struggle for worth within their own faith tradition and families.

There are four responses to the Gospel: being deaf to it, denying it, going with the crowd, or having faith and being healed. Let us be the Gospel to each other and the world, and use these stories of Jesus’ acceptance of all. On this last week of Pride let us acknowledge that Jesus came here to break traditions that are hurtful or that call out one over the other. Let us remind each other that everyone has worth. Every creature God has created is loved. Let us respond like our scriptural women today, let us go forth and have faith, go in peace and be healed. Amen.