

Jesus touches our shame

A lesson about healing from Mark 5:21-34

Mark D. Baker

You are on a street corner downtown with no clothes on. You make a futile effort to cover yourself with your hands and look for a place to hide. Every head turns your direction. Then you wake up. It was a dream, but the sweat on your body lets you know the power of this emotion—shame.

We all have had experiences when we have felt everyone staring at us and we wished we could disappear. These are moments of shame: tripping and falling on some stairs, giving the wrong answer in a class, having the only response to a joke you have told be dead silence. These experiences are inevitable.

There is also a deeper, internalized shame that leads us to believe we are deficient. We internalize the imaginary voices that whisper things like, "You're ugly," "You're dumb," "You talk too much," "You're poor," "You're a failure" or "You're not athletic."

How does God respond to our shame? The Gospels show us how Jesus responded. In Mark 5:21-34, we find Jesus on his way to Jairus' house. A crowd of people accompanies him, pressing on all sides. One woman pushes her way through the crowd, thrusts her hand between a couple of people, touches the back of Jesus' robe and is miraculously healed.

What do we know about this nameless woman? We know she has suffered greatly. Sick for 12 years, she has experienced the frustration of going from doctor to doctor seeking a cure. These fruitless efforts have left her destitute.

Her suffering goes deeper, however,

because of her specific ailment. Most likely she has had an unusual menstrual flow. This flow of blood brought her special problems in her religious community. According to Levitical law someone with an open wound or menstrual flow was considered "unclean" (Leviticus 15:25-33). While unclean, a person could not enter the temple. For most people that was a temporary problem; for this woman it was a permanent state.

Her situation is further complicated by the fact that contact with an unclean person makes one unclean as well. Unfortunately for her, she lived in a time when the Pharisees brought increased attention to these laws and went to the extreme of applying temple laws in their homes. Therefore, Pharisees and their followers would not have allowed this woman into their homes. Although others would not go to that extent, she most likely suffered a general stigma because of how the Pharisees treated her.

Secretly: In the midst of her physical and economic sufferings this woman undoubtedly carried a heavy burden of shame. After 12 long years it is hard to imagine that this shame had not penetrated her being. She would have felt she was a problem for any she had contact with. It is no wonder she approached Jesus from behind and wanted to touch his robe secretly. Beaten down by shame, she sought to draw as little attention to herself as possible. Although confident of his healing power, she probably thought he would want to avoid her like all the other religious leaders. By anonymously touching the robe she avoided confrontation.

Imagine the rush of joy as she felt the healing of her body. But that emotion was overcome by other emotion when she heard Jesus' words, "Who touched my clothes?" She must have

expected an angry response as she fearfully admitted to Jesus that she had touched him. But instead of condemning her for contaminating him with her uncleanness, Jesus said, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease."

Why did Jesus ask who had touched him? To impress the disciples? Probably not. They had already seen more spectacular things. Jesus' concern was for the woman. First of all, by making her healing public he immediately rips away her "unclean" label and starts the process of her re-entry into the community as a healthy person. More significantly Jesus understands that this woman needed more than just physical healing. He pulls her from her shamed position and brings her before the crowd, not to condemn her but to offer her words of peace and encouragement.

Jesus' words must have soaked into her being like water into the dry soil around a parched plant. For years the religious system had alienated her. Although her problem was physical, the looks of the religious leaders must have made her feel inferior as a person, rejected. Now this rabbi, Jesus, offers words that praise her faith, gentle words of peace that soothe her soul, words of hope that her suffering had passed.

Jesus considered it so important to say these words to this woman that he stopped and asked that question even while en route to another person in urgent need of his attention. Certainly God wants to demonstrate similar concern to us as we struggle with our shame.

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