

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 28 JUNE 2009

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Mark 5: 21-43

"She Steals her Well-being"

1. "She steals her healing"! this woman in our reading today.

"She steals her healing", this woman with a 12-year-old persistent bleeding condition, writes Dorothy Lee, a UCA New Testament scholar. Like a robber, she sneaks up behind Jesus and secretly touches the edge of his cloak. She does this "because she is not free for it openly..." (Dorothy Lee 1993: 66)

She is a thief because she breaks the purity laws and codes of her religious society. Her religion taught that a woman in her condition made every place and person she contacted "ceremonially unclean and would convey uncleanness to all who came in contact with her (cf Leviticus 15.35)". (Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 290)

Added to this, we know that in those ancient times, all space was rigidly gendered - a woman was not allowed to approach a male in public. Jairus, the Jewish father of the 12-year-old girl who was critically ill, could approach Jesus. This woman obviously did not have one person who could approach Jesus for her! She was alone in this as well.

So, we find her in the midst of her desperate life. A dread-ful life brimming over with multiple challenges: unable to attend religious gatherings for so many years; in poverty because she spent all her money on doctors, and it seems even they ripped her off; alone and without a community; and most probably sensing that even God had abandoned her! Well she could have prayed the prayer of Jesus on the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me!"

She exists as if in a boat battered by a storm, living a life beaten by the unceasing waves of strife, like the disciples in last week's story. Yet, this woman is nothing like the disciples in the boat in the storm in last week's in Mark 4:35-41 where they fear for their well-being and survival. These experienced fishermen, driven by their anxiety and fear, "emptied themselves of the inner resources to deal with the storm". (Walter Wink. *Wink/LookSmart* web site)

2. What kind of healing is this?

What makes this woman totally different from the disciples is her inner spirit of hope and her desire for well-being. Yes, like them, she would have been anxious, fearful and despairing, as we all are when faced with illness and its overwhelming issues. Yet, as Dorothy Lee writes:

"She is not a timid character, but extraordinarily courageous. By being present in the crowd and by touching Jesus, she is taking a great risk. She steals her healing because she is not free for it openly..." (Dorothy Lee 1993: 66).

And Jesus affirms her thief-like approach, her courage and her faith with the words, "Daughter, you faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." (Mk 5:34)

There is great depth in this response by Jesus. Within this response exist Mark's reasons in sharing this story with all readers throughout time.

By calling this woman "daughter", he informs the surrounding witnesses, including us as readers, that God values and loves, as God has always valued and loved, this woman, this woman whom that society had permanently excluded and made outcast.

And as Jesus constantly does in Mark's Gospel, "Jesus ... both violates and reverses the contagion by his 'touching'" (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 201) and by relating to and accepting this woman's touch and approach.

In this act, Jesus demonstrates that God is interested in such people, in us, in our aloneness, in our suffering. And that God is interested, not only in the physical well-being of this woman, but also in restoring her into her society and community. This means that society and community must change. Yet, society and the early Christian church found it difficult to change and include those formerly excluded.

3. Healing the psychic/social self

I suggest that Jesus knew she may face ongoing discrimination and isolation. So Jesus sought to empower this woman for her new challenges. When he sensed the woman had touched him, he engaged her in dialogue. This was to deal with her identity and meaning system. He wanted to enable a strong identity so that her faith would be healthy.

In this event, Jesus models how each human person and society needs to be open to change. Jesus, as an example, sacrifices male privilege and power to allow a new power relation. This new power relation gives her the opportunity to create a new self, an identity as equal.

So she is "healed" or saved from her former social, religious self. Or, as Paul wrote, she dies to this self created by patriarchy, (I am no longer a Jew or Gentile) and is liberated as Jesus himself changes the way he is.

We read that she told him her whole story: to a male, as stranger. Healing involves meaningful community!

4. Healing involves changing power relations

In and by her actions this woman destabilised the "self", the identity as unclean woman, which that ancient Jewish society had constructed for her.

But, she did not become co-dependent on Jesus, unlike the disciples in the storm who emptied themselves of their power as seasoned seafolk to weather the storm.

She had already begun the journey of empowerment by stealing her healing: not just physical healing, but the strength of character, possessing the inner desire to be healed, and quietly challenging society's right to stop her from being in public and approaching a male stranger.

5. What does this story say to us today?

In ancient and modern societies, Michel Foucault's work (*Discipline and Punish*) reminds us, we are all constructed as conforming citizens, and accept identities and learn to conform to society's values

and patterns.

Michel Foucault's work suggests that power is the effects of our culture to incorporate us "into line with norms and proprieties that culture itself constructs." (Catherine Belsey, *Poststructuralism*, 53)

Yet, as we see in our story, the woman must challenge the way life and roles are set up. She must steal her healing. This is a resistance. Resistance is always possible to relations of power: "Foucault insists: Crime itself is a refusal of the law; eccentricity is a repudiation of the norm; 'vice' is a rejection of conventional ethics. Power is not a thing or a quantity we possess or lose, but a relation of struggle." (p54f)

This is the prophetic urge that all concerned Christians and citizen's should express. How do we learn to listen to those whom our society excludes?

Our story invites us to learn from Jesus as he responded sensitively in his relationship with those who struggled with ill-health.

We are challenged to listen and hear others without comparing and evaluating them according to our own experience and culture. Our first task, suggests Bruce Fink, is to listen carefully to others when we engage them. But, he notes that there are surprisingly few good listeners. One key reason "is that we tend to hear everything in relation to ourselves." (Bruce Fink, *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique*, 1) When we meet another "we tend to locate experiences, feelings, and perspectives of our own that resemble the other person's" (Fink, 1). If we do not understand the other we usually find them strange or even irrational. What we need to learn is to "stop trying to understand so quickly", Fink suggests.

So let us listen to two stories. The first is to encourage us to more deeply appreciate our aging. Let us listen to Margret Atwood's description of a woman in her aging:

This morning I woke with a feeling of dread. I was unable at first to place it... The sun was up, the room already too warm...

My head felt like a sack of pulp. Still in my nightgown, damp from some fright I'd pushed aside like foliage, I pulled myself through the usual dawn rituals-the ceremonies we perform to make ourselves look sane and acceptable to other people. The hair must be smoothed down after whatever apparitions have made it stand on end during the night, the expression of staring disbelief washed from the eyes. God knows what bones I have gnawed in my sleep.

Then I stepped into the shower... I am apprehensive of slipping ...
Margret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*, 35:

A second story: I had a friend who suffered with endometriosis, which meant irregular and prolonged menstrual bleeding associated with extreme pelvic pain. She lived in another State and so our contact was over the phone. She would ring when the pain completely overwhelmed her. It took many, many conversations and self-reflection to realise that I was not really understanding or listening to her actual condition, or to realise what she really wanted in the way of support. Over time I realised I was over-caring, and that this was because I wanted to make her feel better, and lessen my powerlessness. I learnt she did not want me to ring her when I felt like it, which was about my anxiety for her. I learnt to learn from her what she needed; and in just listening on her terms, she actually became free to listen to herself.

Conclusion

We, the least and those from the dominant culture, gender, class, sexuality... we take the initiative, approach Jesus in faith. Jesus returns our approach with his, and does so with that searching look, the compassionate connection (touch), the intimate dialogue. Jesus in this story meets us "in the midst of storm and strife", and empowers us to enter into new forms of inclusive community; the least into creative acts of resistance, upward to be equals; the dominant to give up/let go of false privilege and enter new power relations of equality.

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