

July 1, 2018  
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 8, Year B, RCL  
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert  
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27  
Psalm 130  
2 Corinthians 8:7-15  
Mark 5:21-43

The woman in today's Gospel reading has suffered from hemorrhages for *twelve* years.

In her search for a cure, she has tried everything. Quack healers have taken her money, but in return have given her no relief. Still, she bleeds, worse than ever. She is ghostly pale from anemia. She is always weak and tired, and therefore she struggles to keep up with the basic tasks necessary to survive. Her struggle is physical, but not only that; it's also, perhaps even more importantly, emotional and spiritual.

According to the community's religious traditions, a menstruating woman is "unclean." The woman's hemorrhages have left her "unclean" for most of the past twelve years.

She is a devout woman who loves God and wants to serve God faithfully. Wondering what she has done to displease God so tremendously, she constantly replays the events of her life. Why would God consider her to be "dirty" all this time? She thinks of nothing that would seem to necessitate so severe a punishment. But she must have done something, and she is sure that everyone who looks at her can see her guilt.

Anyone touching a menstruating woman is also made "unclean." Therefore even the comfort she might receive from others has been restricted. Rather than risk further displeasing God, she physically distances herself from family and friends.

She blames herself for her situation; therefore, she is filled with shame. Her shame is invisible to others, but she carries it with her everywhere she goes. Her shame inhabits the places inside her where *God* should be. She is spiritually bereft.

For several months, rumors had been flying about the man called Jesus of Nazareth. The woman heard that he had performed miraculous healings. She heard that he was breaking all the rules. She heard that he was turning the social order upside down. She heard that the religious authorities are less than happy about all this. Whether or not they are happy, Jesus is her last hope.

The woman is at home when she hears a commotion outside. A man was running through the streets of the village, shouting, "Jesus of Nazareth is here!" Peeking from her door, she sees her neighbors emerging from their homes and shuffling toward the lakeshore. Certain that God has sent Jesus to her, she falls in behind them.

The woman stays back from the edge of the crowd, so as to avoid accidentally touching anyone. Still, she catches glimpses of Jesus, who is still making his way from the water's edge. It's slow going, because everyone wants his attention. She can tell it's him by the way the others treat him, deferring to him as if he is the emperor. Jesus doesn't look at all like an emperor: he looks plain and calm and kind. The people don't seem nervous, as they normally would in the presence of someone important. Instead, they look both surprised and peaceful, as if they had been lost in the middle of a hot desert and had just stumbled upon a cool oasis.

Suddenly, from the corner of her eye, the woman sees a man rushing up to the crowd and pushing his way into the bodies. She recognizes him as Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He must be trying to get to Jesus. Jesus is controversial at the synagogue; her heart catches for a moment as she wonders whether there will be trouble. But when Jairus reaches Jesus, rather than assaulting him, he drops to the ground. Jairus might be expected to fall at the feet of someone who outranks him—but Jesus is his subordinate. Jairus must want something from Jesus. Everyone knows that Jairus' daughter has been sick. The woman can't hear what the men are saying. But she sees Jairus get to his feet and start back in the direction from which he had come. Jesus is following Jairus, and the crowd is following Jesus.

The woman knows that Jesus can provide the help she so desperately needs. But she can't simply march up to Jesus like Jairus did. She is not supposed to touch or even speak to men who are unrelated to her. As she ponders her options, it occurs to her: Jesus is so powerful that all she needs to do is touch his clothing. She can do that without anyone noticing. She can use the crowd for cover. Because of her illness, she's been practically invisible for twelve years anyway.

If she's careful, not even Jesus will notice. She's not sure that makes it okay. Her shame paralyzes her into a moment of indecision. But then, something amazing happens: she feels the shame seeping from her body. She knows that God has never wanted her to suffer. God has sent Jesus to provide relief.

Feeling a lightness she hasn't known in years and a freedom she has never known, the woman eases up and into the crowd following Jairus and Jesus. Jesus is striding along through the lakeside breeze, his cloak billowing after him. Making her way through the people, she carefully edges up behind Jesus. The same force that removed her shame now steadies her nerves. Slowly and casually she reaches out, as she might reach out to brush the hair out of a child's face. For a fraction of an instant, her pale hand makes contact with the linen fabric of Jesus' cloak. That's all it takes. Her hemorrhage has stopped. The woman slows, letting the crowd pass her by.

But the woman won't escape quite so easily. Jesus abruptly stops and turns, his eyes searching the faces nearby. The crowd has to stop, too, and this causes the people press closer together. The woman is trapped among them. The question in Jesus' eyes moves to his lips. "Who touched my clothes?" His tone is not angry, but she is fearful. Has she broken the rules? Will Jesus understand? Will her bleeding return? Will the crowd punish her?

In a flash, the woman realizes that a man powerful enough to stop her bleeding will certainly be compassionate enough to relieve her fear. She steps forth from among the others. She throws herself and her fear at Jesus' feet, much as Jairus had only minutes before. She blurts out her whole story. Jesus listens carefully. Then he speaks directly to her, himself breaking the rule about speaking to an unrelated woman. When he gets to Jairus's house, he will break another rule, when he touches a dead person.

Jesus could have simply let the woman go. But there is something Jesus needs to tell her; there is something she needs to know. Her bleeding has stopped, *and* she is healed. She is healed not by his touch, but rather by her own faith. Jesus honors the woman by calling her "daughter." This names her as a member of his chosen family and ends the separation she has endured.

Even if she never sees Jesus again, she can carry that faith with her everywhere she goes for the rest of her life. With such faith, she need never fear the return of her bleeding—she need never fear anything, ever again.

Voices are now calling Jesus; he turns, and the woman slips away. But she is no longer invisible; she is no longer unclean. She is restored: to her place in the community, and in her relationship with God. By the grace of God, the woman's faith has carried her to this moment of restoration; by the grace of God, her faith will keep her there, for the rest of her life, and beyond.