

An Inconvenient Woman

Mark 5:21-34

Joanne Gallardo

October 21, 2018

²¹ When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake.²² Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet.²³ He pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live."²⁴ So Jesus went with him.

A large crowd followed and pressed around him.²⁵ And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years.²⁶ She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse.²⁷ When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak,²⁸ because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed."²⁹ Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

³⁰ At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"

³¹ "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'"

³² But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it.³³ Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth.³⁴ He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."

Women are terribly inconvenient. Whether you're looking at an ancient text like the Bible, looking at more recent history, or trying to appoint a Supreme Court nominee, women seem to get in the way. Women bust up our image of heroes when they come forth with truth about their past actions. Women adjust our notions of productivity when they take time to have kids and plan a family. Women seem to act up when the rights of others are taken away, planning marches, blocking roads, and refusing to be silent when what's wanted is a keeping of the status quo.

In the news lately, people have a difficult time believing women. Women put their suffering on full display, detailing painful accounts of assault or other mistreatment, and yet many people remain unmoved. Women are telling an inconvenient narrative. Maybe they've named someone we like, or admire, or someone we thought was a "good person." Maybe taking their accounts into

perspective creates a time crunch, or a new employee search, or the need to fire someone, or an awkward confrontation. Women telling the truth is just not convenient.

In this story, the woman with the issue of blood, whose name we don't know, provides a bit of a stumbling block to Jesus when he tries to do his work of healing of someone else someplace else. I had a professor point out to me one time that I should pay attention to all the times Jesus is interrupted. Some of Jesus' most holy and important work happens when he is doing something else or is on his way to doing something completely different. What is initially seen as an inconvenience turns into nothing short of a miracle. A woman, full of tenacity and a lot of vulnerability, makes her way to Jesus and touches the hem of his garment.

Vulnerability, for many people, is one of the hardest states to endure. Illness, for instance, can make us very vulnerable. We aren't ourselves, we're likely dependent on someone else, we're dependent on our doctor treating us, and we're at the mercy of others when our illness prevents us from day to day activities. The symptoms of our illness may be noticeable, possibly embarrassing. Maybe symptoms turn into an inconvenience for others. The illness may be physical or mental. Maybe the symptoms aren't visible at all, and we need to do the work of convincing others that yes, we really are sick. We may or may not be believed when this happens. And we may or may not be judged for it.

Imagine if your illness involves bleeding. Non stop bleeding for 12 years. Commonly, this is seen as a female problem and in the case of our scripture, it is. But no matter your sex, you can imagine the embarrassment, pain, and struggle of perpetual bleeding. In ancient Judaism, and in contemporary orthodox Judaism, this makes a person unclean. I once sat in on a class taught by an orthodox rabbi/professor...he walked around with a special covering for seats because he might unknowingly sit in a seat where a menstruating woman had sat before him, rendering the seat unclean. Not because of what may be on the seat, but because an unclean person had touched something, thus rendering it unclean. Just the act of him doing this made me embarrassed, and I hadn't even sat there. I was just embarrassed knowing that I, as a woman, could be seen as

untouchable. That the things I touch every day could then be seen as untouchable.

This woman could very well be any woman struggling to get by today, dealing with chronic illness. The scriptures say she spent all she had on doctors trying to rid herself of this disease. So now she was both broke and sick. I think that it was likely that her doctors did not take her seriously, which unfortunately is still the case for many women around the world today. There are doctors out there who seek to minimize and trivialize the pain of women, and women are more likely to be told that their problem is “psychological” and therefore “less real.” Her doctors seemed to have no problem taking her money whether they could actually help her or not. Maybe some doctors wouldn’t see her because she was an “unclean woman.” Maybe her status and access didn’t allow her to see qualified medical professionals who would take her illness seriously.

She would have suffered from both social and religious isolation as an unclean woman, according to Mosaic law. For more clarity on that, you can read Leviticus 15. To be clean again, she would have had to have stopped bleeding for 7 days. Bleeding continuously meant she never had a chance to be free of the confines of her illness. So she ventures out. She ventures out to encounter Jesus, hoping that she will be rid of this metaphorical millstone around her neck. This was not an easy task for the woman. For anyone who has been anemic, it’s common to feel weak, tired, and melancholy, the lack of iron in your system contributing to your discomfort. So in the heat, sick, bleeding, and hurting, she puts all her faith in Jesus because she believes he is the answer to her suffering.

This woman was isolated. Being perpetually unclean, any connections she had were likely severed. If she were married, her husband likely divorced her. If she had children, they were likely taken away from her as she would have made them unclean. Anyone who regularly associated with her, friends and family alike, probably saw little of her due to her need to be “set apart” until she could be “clean” again...which was never, because as the scriptures say, she had this problem for 12 years non-stop.

While this issue debilitates her, she does not let it define her, even though the Gospel writer defines her by her illness. If she did want it to define her, she would have stayed at home. She braves the public with a condition that has the potential to be quite embarrassing. This woman spends her days trying to staunch the flow of blood from a medical condition, likely originating in her reproductive system, and she is likely on edge and vigilant at all times. Biblically, she is a woman of courage. No one comes with her, no relative, no maid, no one is mentioned. For all we know, this woman is alone in the world. She likely would have been unable to bear children after contracting this condition. For a culture that valued women for their reproductive abilities, she is likely not considered a productive member of society, at least not anymore, not now. Given her needs due to her medical condition, she is probably considered a strain on society. Where have we heard this before in our own time and culture?

One of the many things I admire about this woman is that this woman schemed. She orchestrated this encounter with Jesus. Convinced that by simply touching him she would be healed, she snuck up on him. She used the jostling, business, and noisiness of the crowd to come toward him and touch his garment. She becomes a crafty risk taker. She knows that anyone who may touch her or bump into her would be unclean. She knows that she will be making JESUS unclean. And she doesn't care. She needs to be well.

Many of us avoid crowds. We don't want to be out in the heat, or the cold, or around so many people who are likely to get testy. It's not worth the end result. This woman doesn't care who's there or what the conditions are, she's going to touch Jesus, if only the hem of his garment. While her life does depend on this encounter, the scripture gives no indication that she's actually seen Jesus do...anything. She's only "heard." She is in such desperate need for something different that she trusted only having heard that Jesus was a great healer.

Jesus is interrupted. He's going to heal Jairus' daughter, he runs into a crowd per usual, and then he feels power go out from him. Someone special touched him. The crowds are literally pressing on every side of him, but he feels one person touch the hem of his garment. He was likely hot, cranky, thinking about the next

thing (which would be the very important task of healing a little girl), and possibly not in the mood to have yet another encounter with a needy person. But the power goes out from him, and he notices.

Jesus asks who touched him. It seems to be a ridiculous question; even his disciples seem a bit annoyed. There are a whole bunch of people trying to touch you, how are we supposed to figure out which one caused a reaction in you? The woman knows that the jig is up. She was caught. She specifically came to Jesus while he was in a bustling crowd so she would *not* get caught. She throws herself at Jesus' feet and asks for mercy. Jesus does not rebuke the woman. He encourages her, telling her that her faith has made her well. After 12 years of living hell, she is finally free.

I have stated before in sermons that I am a pessimist. I do find it difficult to look on the bright side of things, and while faith in God isn't difficult for me personally, faith in things turning out positive, when the nightly news tells us otherwise, proves challenging for me. A few months ago our brother Oscar Siwali told us that prayer and action go hand in hand. God encourages us to move and act. And also a few weeks ago, a friend of mine had the opportunity to hear Chelsea Clinton give a talk in New England. She let me know of this quote from that talk. Chelsea said, "Optimism is a moral choice. We believe things can and must be better. And if we do, we must mobilize for that work."

This woman chose optimism as a moral choice. She believed things can and would be better, if she could only just reach out and touch Jesus. She fought for what she needed. She risked a whole lot for what she needed. She reminds me a lot of Jacob wrestling with the angel, saying that he won't let the angel go until they bless him. She wrestled with social stigmas and Mosaic Law and came out the other end a free and healed woman. She risks inconvenience and shunning, daring to reach out and touch what she needs.

According to one scholar, the elements that constitute as "faith" are rather interesting. They say this woman comes to Jesus with determination, courage, desperation, need and self-interest. These, according to scholar Robin Gahallar Branch, are elements that come together in what Jesus dubs "faith." She also calls

this “courageous pushiness.” So in coming to Jesus with our desperation, our need, our optimism and desire for things to be better, we are stepping out in a courageous act of faith.

A few weeks ago, Mag preached on the importance of persistence, of pestering God for what we need. She told the story of the unjust judge who gives a woman what she needs after she won't stop bothering him. In a way, this story is related. A woman risks everything, being rebuked, being publically outed as “unclean,” risks being an inconvenience and is eventually given what she asks for. Persistence is rewarded, and is looked upon as “faith.”

What would we dare to do, what would we dare to risk if we believed our faith would take us where we needed to go? Would we trust it? Would we have doubts? Are we willing to be an inconvenience? Our Gospel story tells us being gutsy, being persistent, and being a bother when it comes to encountering Jesus is the very essence that changes us and “makes us well.” It is my hope that we can risk being an inconvenience and boldly follow the healing power of Jesus.