

Proper 8B 2021 sermon

Mark 5:21-43

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." He went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

One of the fascinating facts discovered by scientists who study light is what physicists have called the "wave-particle duality:" which is to say, light has characteristics of both a wave and a particle. And an especially intriguing finding about this "wave-particle duality" is what scientists call "the observer effect." When a scientist examining a beam of light shining through two parallel slits looks for light *particles*, she will find that light is composed of particles, and the **wave** characteristics of the light seem to collapse. *Look* for a particle, and you will *find* a particle, not a wave.¹

I believe there is a similar dynamic in human behavior. For the minute we start *looking* for a certain characteristic in someone, chances are we will *find* that characteristic, and will tend **not** to see *other* characteristics or potentials in that person. If I am looking for a negative characteristic in another person, for instance, or have labeled that person with a negative label, then chances are, I will **find** that negative characteristic, which justifies the negative label; and any *positive* characteristics or potential in that other person will tend to vanish from my sight and awareness.

If I enter the house of someone I am very fond of, chances are I will notice the vase of fresh flowers on that person's coffee table, and will react with delight. But if I enter the house of someone whom I have – consciously or unconsciously – labeled with a negative label, I *might* take note, instead, of the **dust** on that coffee table, rather than the flowers; and my inner reaction, though unspoken, will predictably be negative. If we have already judged a person or a group of persons negatively, our observations will tend to confirm that judgment. Sociologists call this “confirmation bias.” What we see tends to be what we expect to see. It confirms our bias.

Look for a particle, and we will find a particle.

In today's Gospel, a crowd has gathered around Jesus. And in that crowd is a woman, who is not named. Bible Scholar David Lose notes that “She is described only as a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. Assuming this was most likely vaginal bleeding, that condition would have rendered her both [ritually] impure **and** unable to bear children [*both* of which would make her an outcast in her culture *and* religion]. Which perhaps explains why she is there all alone...”² Unlike Jairus, the synagogue leader who has just beseeched Jesus on behalf of his daughter, this unnamed woman seems to have no advocate, no family, no community to beseech Jesus on *her* behalf. If the crowd around Jesus knows this woman, they probably think of her as “the woman who has bled for twelve years, and whose womb is barren.” “Bleeding and barren” was likely the identity, the label, that people gave her – consciously or unconsciously. And chances are, they never saw beyond that defining characteristic; never saw all the *positive* gifts and qualities the woman had. They looked for a particle, and all the wave characteristics vanished.

And one gets a sense that this woman had come to **accept** their labeling of her, at least to *some* degree. For it seems she does not consider herself worthy of even speaking to Jesus. Rather, she speaks to *herself*, saying, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.”

And touch his clothes she does. And “Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.” And Jesus is immediately **aware** that power has gone forth from him. He turns and asks, “Who touched my

clothes?” His disciples think the question makes no sense, since the crowd is pressing in on him from all sides, and *everyone* is touching his clothes!

But, as is always the case when we read the Gospels, there is more to the story than what we see on the surface. We must go deeper. John Shea explains, “The woman touches Jesus in a *different* way. She has heard about Jesus. We are not told *what* she heard, but she has obviously heard enough to develop an appropriate interior disposition. She has a cooperating consciousness, one that is able to **receive** the flow of divine power. This consciousness does not stress *physical* touch as if [physical contact alone magically] produced healing... The... [healing] love [that] is coming through Jesus... is *spiritual* love, and so her **interior openness** to divine love is what is important. Jesus’ desire to **[give]** divine, compassionate love is matched by her readiness to *receive* it.”³ Jesus’ desire to give divine, compassionate love is matched by her readiness to receive it.

Some of you know that a few weeks ago, one of the pieces of equipment that controls our lighting here in the church was knocked out – quite possibly by one of the lightning strikes we had that week. In an effort to understand how we might avoid more lightning damage in the future, I’ve been reading about lightning. And I’ve learned that a strong electrostatic charge develops in the bottom part of a thundercloud, and that charge seeks to find the path of least resistance to the ground. Lightning occurs when power flows out from the cloud to a receptive point on the ground: most often, a high point, a tall tree or a tall building; a point “reaching up toward the clouds,” if you will.

The woman in our Gospel is reaching out toward the source of healing power, Jesus, and that divine power of healing love is always seeking to find a receptive place reaching out toward it. The power of healing love flows from Jesus into the woman like lightning from a cloud to a receptive point on the ground.

John Shea notes: “Both Jesus and the woman know ‘it’ has happened. Salvific power has gone out and salvific power has been taken in. And they know it immediately.”⁴ Jesus wants to identify the recipient of this outflow of healing love, and the woman comes forward and “tells him the whole truth” – tells him her whole story, about how she has been suffering from this flow of blood for 12 years; a flow of blood that has made her an outcast in her own religion and society. She has spent all her money on experts claiming to be able to heal her, but she has only gotten worse, and has been left destitute.

After hearing “the whole truth,” Jesus says to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” Notice that Jesus has now given her a name: daughter. No longer is she to be known as “the one who is bleeding and barren;” she is to be known as “daughter of God.” She has **had** that identity all along, but people could not see it, since they were focused almost exclusively on her bleeding and barrenness. John Shea writes, “She has never

been an unclean woman with uncontrolled bleeding. [That has never been her true identity.] She is a daughter of God who is suffering. [And, at some level of her being, she has] held onto that spiritual identity [as ‘daughter of God,’] and that deeper identity gave her courage to reach for God’s love as it was manifesting itself in Jesus. God’s love is for God’s children, and she is one of God’s children. That is her faith. And the healing that comes from that faith is more than physical. She can go in peace and enter back into the community. ...She is re-included into interpersonal and community living.”⁵

My friends, the practice of *negatively* characterizing and naming one another, and reducing another person or group to **one** negative characteristic or label – that practice is alive and well in our world today! And I am as guilty of it as the next person. In our minds, we categorize someone as Democrat, Republican, homeless, homosexual, foreigner, Black, Asian, Muslim, Palestinian. And, all too often, all the **other** characteristics and qualities and giftedness and Christ-likeness which that person *also* has, disappear from our sight and our consciousness. We only see the particle.

And, let’s face it: it’s *easier* for us that way – easier to reduce someone to *one* characteristic or label. That way, we don’t have to deal with the complexities of people, both their shining side **and** their shadow side. And focusing on a negative characteristic in another person has the added benefit of making ourselves feel superior, thus allowing us to avoid facing our *own* shadow side. When we label someone negatively, pigeon-hole them, we don’t need to do the hard work of fulfilling our baptismal vow to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourself.”

My friends, I have never come across a woman who has been bleeding for 12 years. But I *have* come across people who have suffered from other conditions for years on end: addictions, chronic mental or physical illness, PTSD, severe handicaps, entrenched generational poverty. And all too often, I must admit, I have seen them and labeled them only through that one characteristic. The person doesn’t *have* an addiction; he **is** an addict, and all his positive characteristics go unnoticed. A person isn’t *suffering* from homelessness; she **is** homeless, and all her other wonderful qualities and potentials disappear from my awareness.

But what I have found is that, often, all it takes is for me to remember that that other person is a child of God, open myself to their humanity, express some kindness, and a channel is opened for the flow of divine healing love through me to that other child of God. It flows immediately, like lightning to receptive ground, and we both feel it. And, more often than not, *some* degree of healing occurs. The weight that person is carrying – be it the weight of hopelessness, or the weight of some stigma that society has placed on them, or the weight of self-loathing that they have been feeling for years on end – the weight seems a bit lighter in the wake of that healing flow of divine love. And, over time, there may even be a transformation – both in the other person, and in me. All because I

have simply chosen to look for more than a label; more than just a particle. I have chosen to look for a child of God just like myself: gifted, flawed, and beloved.

AMEN

- 1 <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/1998/02/980227055013.htm>
- 2 from David Lose's Blog, "...in the Meantime," *Pentecost 5 B: Known and Named* Posted by DJL on Jun 22, 2015 in *Dear Partner in Preaching*, http://www.davidlose.net/2015/06/pentecost-5-b-known-and-named/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3Adavidlose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29
- 3 John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 163
- 4 Shea, *ibid.*
- 5 Shea, *ibid.*