

March 26, 2017

*“Reaching Out”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 5:24-34

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

There's an ancient Greek myth that tells the story of the god, Atlas. Atlas offended the king of the gods, Zeus, and Zeus punished Atlas by condemning him to carry the weight of the entire world on his shoulders for eternity. You're probably familiar with that image – seeing it as a painting or sculpture. A strong, muscular man, carrying a large globe on his shoulder, stooped down under the weight of the crushing world...a load not easy to be borne.” Apparently, that was as tough a punishment as those philosophically distinguished Greeks could conjure up. Yet, sadly, it seems so many of us today know exactly how heavy it is to bear such a burden. For don't we often feel the weight of the world bearing down on our shoulders because of some issue in our life that causes us suffering or pain, some issue that makes us feel helpless and afraid, some issue that makes us worry or feel insecure.

In today's Scripture we hear about a woman who suffered with constant bleeding for twelve years. That's a long time to suffer. I'm sure we can all imagine in our mind's eye how utterly discouraged she must have been after visiting physician after physician and spending all the money she had, and not getting any better, but in fact, getting worse. We can envision her desperation and despair, her depressed state of body and mind. And then, Jesus comes to her town. And this woman purposely goes to seek him out. And she goes with hope, born out of an extraordinary faith. Extraordinary! Her faith must have been so obvious to the disciples, because the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, all tell this story in nearly the same identical way. Fighting against a human throng, the metaphor here, of course, her fighting against all human odds, this woman stoops down, because that's how you are when the weight of the world is pressing on you... stoops down, and reaches out her hand to touch Jesus, to touch God. And she is made well.

Now I have a feeling this story may resonate with us more than we might like to admit. As Max Lucado writes, “We've all been her at one time or another. We've been there. Desperate, dirty, drained. Illness took her strength. But what takes your strength? Red ink? Hard drink? Drugs? Late nights in the wrong arms? Long days on the wrong job? No job? Pregnant too soon? Pregnant too often? Depression, loneliness, sadness, any number of things? Might her hand be your hand?” You know, it's too bad, but we live in a society where admitting our problems or showing any signs of weakness is generally frowned upon. So we're forced to put up that good front... when in reality we too might be bleeding inside. You see, society today encourages us to take God out of the equation when it comes to

helping or healing ourselves. Instead, we're encouraged to rely more on the culture for a remedy - perhaps alcohol to "calm us down," spending money on "things" that make us feel better about ourselves, all kinds of drugs to help us cope, surfing the internet to provide an escape, and more. But ultimately, when these fixes don't work, when the problems remain, when the world weighs too heavy on our shoulder, we need to finally realize that we have to look to something beyond if we are to ever have hope for real healing in our lives. We have to reach out our hand, in faith, like the woman, to the Great Physician, Christ Jesus.

The author of Hebrews writes, "Without faith it is impossible to please God. For whoever approaches him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." And that is what happens in today's scripture. The woman says, "If I just touch his robe, I'll be healed." And that symbolism of her reaching out to touch Jesus has profound meaning. Rev. George Hubbard writes, "God's grace of healing is not (given) to satisfy the popular demand. No. For healing to occur, whether it be physical or spiritual, there must be the purposeful touch of a faithful soul." Like the touch of the woman. Her faith, was evident when she touched Jesus. And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your disease." And we can be assured that when we reach out with that kind of genuine faith, we, too, will hear that same promise!

You see, that's the importance of an honest, genuine faith. It's the channel God uses to heal us. Because faith means we trust both in God's power in our lives, as well as God's plan for our lives. Faith means we surrender to God all our disease and our dis-ease, and we trust our future into God's hands, whatever that may be. Yes, whatever that may be. And that's most important to remember about healing.

Because having faith does not mean that God is automatically going to put our bodies back in perfect order. Faith does not mean that the circumstances in our lives will instantaneously change. Faith does not assure us the immediate removal of suffering. Even Jesus said, "Each day has troubles of its own." But faith does mean that we trust that God will give us everything we need to get through the suffering. Faith means that we will trust God and God's will, even when we can't understand. Faith means that we will let God work in us in such a way that, even if we are not physically cured this side of heaven, that we can still find healing in our lives.

That's why we are having a healing service here today. Because many of us here are stooped down by the weight of the world on our shoulders. There are needs and desires for healing in our church family - be it physical, emotional, spiritual. And we long to hear Jesus say to us, "Your faith has made you

well... you are freed from your sickness... your sins are forgiven... do not fear... believe... go in peace... I choose to make you clean." You see, Biblical healing implies a wholeness of body, mind and spirit.

Fred Craddock shares this story. "One Sunday I was out of town and found a small church where I could attend the morning worship. It seemed like a warm, friendly place. I took my seat, a bit early, and soon the church was totally full. The worship started as the choir came down. Following the choir came the minister. I was absolutely shocked. He was very tall, I suppose 6'4". He was also very large, maybe, three hundred pounds. But the most noticeable feature was his lumbering gait. He walked awkwardly, with his long useless arms at his sides, like they were awaiting further instructions. His head was somewhat misshapen, his hair was askew. He stumbled up the three or four steps to the pulpit and when he turned to face us, I saw the thick glasses, and through them I could see the milky film over his eyes, one of his eyes going out one way, nothing coming in the other. When he read, he held the Bible near his nose. When he spoke, you could hear him strain as he pushed out the words. But I lost all consciousness of those first impressions in just a short while. He read I Corinthians 13, and spoke on the subject, "But the greatest of these is love." His sermon was so warm and full of love and affection that I could feel the special relationship between him and his congregation. Yes, you could just feel the love he exuded as it reached out to those in the pews, and the love came back from those people. I was captured. What is this I asked myself? How could this grotesque creature be so full of love? I didn't understand. Then I started remembering all those classic stories about those who had grotesque features and yet were gifted with a special quality for love and affection, like Beauty and the Beast, and the Hunchback of Notre Dame. I thought of children with Down's Syndrome, and how they have the capacity to love and grab you and hug you and kiss you when other children stand at a distance. Is this what I'm seeing here? Only the grace of God grants people who lack the attractiveness on the outside to have that quality on the inside. I wanted to get acquainted with this extraordinary preacher so I lingered at the door hoping to invite him for lunch. He couldn't go, but I stood at the door and heard his words and observed his pastoral care, as he greeted, comforted and touched his flock. One older woman, warmly held his hand at the door. She spoke with him and said, "I wish I could know your mother." And he responded by saying, "My mother's name is Grace." I saw the woman was having the same trouble as I was. The answer didn't fit the question. She didn't understand why he responded to the question, "I wish I knew your mother" with "My mother's name is Grace." When everybody had left and I talked with him a few minutes in the back pew. I asked him about his unusual response. "You answered that woman, 'My mother's name is Grace.'" He said, "It is. When I was born, I was put up

for adoption at the Department of Family Services. But as you can see, nobody would want to adopt me. I went from foster home to foster home, and when I was about 16 or 17, I saw some young people going into church. I wanted to be like those young people, so I went in there too. And there was Grace, my mother, waiting for me. The Grace of God.”

Can you see the similarities between his story and that woman two thousand years ago? I’m sure the weight of the world was on him, as well. I’m sure he at one point was desperate and depressed. But that day at the church, Jesus Christ was waiting for him. So he reached out and touched the Great Physician. And he was made well, made whole, healed of his ‘dis-ease’ in a way that many of us with good health and fit bodies may never fully understand, but a way in which God’s love, compassion, mercy and grace, especially grace, was made so very evident.

In a moment, you will be offered the opportunity to come, seeking the physical, emotional or spiritual healing you desire in your life. What we are doing this morning is not magic. It is not contrived. It is not manipulation. What we are doing here is sacramental. By coming to receive the consecrated oil put on your forehead in the sign of the cross – you receive a symbol of God’s grace and love and his healing power. So will you come forward and reach out and touch the Christ. Amen