

Who is That Lady?

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, Rev. Denise Dunbar-Perkins

August 9, 2020; Psalm 30, Mark 5:21-43

Let us pray:

“We are standing on holy ground

And we know that there are angels all around

Let us praise Jesus now

For we are standing in His presence on holy ground” – O Lord as we gather in your most holy presence, may the words that are spoken today be true to your spirit and fall on open ears and enter into willing hearts. AMEN

Around this time last year, there was a news story about a homeless woman who was recorded singing opera in a New York subway station. Yes, I realize that a lot of events have occurred in the last 12 months and it is hard to remember life before that. But this one stood out for me because, it was what may be called a feel-good story! This lady, in her 50s had been living on the street for almost a year, but her history was that she had immigrated from Russia 20 something years ago to work as a classical music performer. She fell on hard times when two unfortunate events occurred in her life. First, she had a very serious illness that wasn't well covered with insurance and then someone stole her \$14,000 violin. As a result, she lost her way of making a living. Bottom line she ended up on the street and became a “homeless person.” Of course, finding out the details of her life story was quite intriguing and then, because of that, she became more human to us, beyond being just another person with no permanent address. In fact, she has regained a version of her former life because she was offered a recording contract. Pretty hopeful and heartwarming isn't it? But despite her happy ending, I believe that something similar happens to many of us no matter who we are, when an event or circumstance in our life becomes the only thing people see of us, and therefore defines us as that “condition” only. For example, we become that “person in the wheelchair”, that fat kid, that old man, the lady with cancer, that homeless person or the label that some of us are born with, that black person.... we end up only being described by what is seen on the outside and the rest of our human story disappears.

So, in today's scripture, enter in the lady who touched the hem of Jesus' garment. I don't know about you but I'd like to find out who she was, wouldn't you? Now what we do know is on the day of that big rally and gathering for Jesus that she wasn't supposed to be there.

In fact, she had plenty of reasons to be terrified but she was desperate for help and healing. However, she wasn't supposed to be there in the crowd sneaking through, trying to *touch* the hem of his coat. Surely if she could touch even that, she would be healed. Wouldn't she?

But then again, she was not supposed to be there and if she were found out she would be in some serious trouble, especially if there were unmarked police chariots patrolling the area!

Because... social culture and custom said she wasn't supposed to be there. And of course, the Law said she wasn't supposed to be there: that law in Leviticus said that she was unclean because of her flow of blood and should not be touched by anyone or she herself shouldn't touch others.

Such harsh and uncomfortable rules to abide by, and to think that she's been bleeding like this for twelve years and considered to have been ritually unclean for all of those years. Additionally, anyone she touched would also be rendered ritually unclean and would have to practice social distance for the rest of the day.* So, for the past twelve years she was supposed to stay home, be quarantined, avoiding contact with anyone. It's starting to sound familiar to our "evolved" 21st Century ears, isn't it?

Yet interestingly enough, as she pushed and snuck her way through the crowd, as this quarantined person nobody noticed her – she was invisible...*a virtual outcast.*

So who was this nameless, invisible, but gutsy lady? Now, in the Christian tradition of redemption, we focus on the wonderful outcome of this story ... Jesus blessing her because of her faith, and she goes on her merry way... but who was she? Is she you? Is she me? This so-called "outcast?" What was her offense?

Apparently, it was having this long-term illness over which she had no control. It should make one wonder about her lost identity and sense of isolation. Therefore, I invite us all to consider these questions:

Did she have a life-long mate, children, a standing in the community?

Did she cook for guests and laugh with them?

Did she sell baked goods at the Farmer's Market?

Did she sing her children to sleep?

Was she always a presence and participant in worship?

Perhaps she organized protests against injustices in her community. Most importantly: what was her name? Was it Lydia or Sarah....Jeri or Cece or Mattie?

Yet all we know of her is that she was this outcast – thrown away, an object of disdain, with no compassion ever offered to her, living as an invisible person for 12 years, and interestingly enough, it began in the same year of the birth of the young girl, the daughter of Jarius, a rich community leader whom Jesus had been called to heal.

Perhaps this unnamed lady herself gave birth to a child which contributed to her condition. Where would that child be now? Does she know of her mother? Hmm, could she have been the wife of Jarius and mother of the girl and the child was raised by her stepmother? Maybe that is what emboldened her to take action, so to be witness to the miraculous cure of her daughter by Jesus! Were there other children who never speak their mother's name? Does she have parents, siblings, Instagram friends? Or was she "unfriended" by the entire community on Facebook? We really don't know if any of this was true about this lady, but what is true is that many times in our society we ourselves may fall victim to a societal out-casting -- not for what we've done, but for what we are or sometimes what we become, often through no fault of our own.

At some point in our lives, we all carry the possibility of "otherness," be it because of race, physical challenges, finances, political or theological beliefs, an injury, mental illness; who we love; or now a pandemic -- there is always the potential of being cast out of the societal norm in any of these given contexts. Does not your life change when you lose your ability to remember people around you, or your ability to go on a walk without assistance of a cane, to hold down a stable place of living, to keep a marriage together. We

are so protective of our health, our finances, our relationships and most of all, our status in society. What happens is that when others begin to define what is normal, what is acceptable for us all---we can find ourselves being pushed to the margins.

As a result, how many of us begin to cope like her –even if we don’t realize it? *Metaphorically or perhaps literally...*

Sneaking around with our heads down, afraid to be recognized desperately hiding the truth about ourselves for fear of being shunned and isolated, for fear of being looked on as some sort of nameless nobody, who is desperate to find some cure, some relief but terrified of what it would take to lay hold of it.

We experience the ultimate irony that even in these days of rampant social media, where we have countless friends in cyberspace, there is still this sense of loneliness because we don’t want to “share” everything on said social media. I also want to remind you that there are so many creative ways in how we contribute to the making of our friends and neighbors in becoming outcasts!!! Even us good Christian folks. Think about it! Sometimes when we describe other people in our conversations we tend to gravitate towards their otherness for a descriptor of them and we want to believe that it doesn't relegate them to the margins. But it does --- we know that because many times we are they. Indeed, if we are that other person we want to say “no! See me in my entirety.”

And what is even sadder is that being an outcast, being the “other” does not always mean you’re not just being ignored. Sometimes being “cast aside” is the least of your problems, being different enough that the crowd attacks your right to exist...telling you to “go back to where you came from” when where you came from is filth. In reality, however, we all come from our mother’s womb, this is what we all have in common, but are dismissed or attacked because we look different, think differently, and have different world perspectives. Therefore, your humanity itself is made invisible and/or delegitimized. When this happens, we live in a society that is broken on so many levels. We struggle on specific occasions in our own personal lives with

the brokenness of spirit. The Lord knows that we need some precious healing, collectively and individually.

The kind of healing that I am talking about is not a physical change but instead a comfort in the midst of the storm, knowing and confirming that you are loved completely just as you are. Your worth is not tied up by what society deems as okay for being seen as “normal” but rather having Jesus see us as complete just the way we are.

How often can we not see beyond the little bit of something that will make life more bearable? How often are we only too willing to settle for overcoming the main symptom and then slip back into the crowd without daring to imagine what more there could be if the entire disease or bad situation was eradicated? How often do we look for nothing more than that from Jesus and from his body, the church? A little bit of something to make us feel a bit better. A little touch to get us through the week?

How often do we think that we’re not worth any more than that? Surely, God has got more important things to do - more important people to attend to? Surely, there is a twelve-year-old girl somewhere, dying of hunger or disease, who warrants God’s attention much more than us? Who are we to expect Jesus to stop and take notice?

So we just slip through the crowd for a little touch to make life bearable and then slip off again.....just like our unnamed lady in the scripture today had intended to do – going unnoticed, unimportant, unchallenged, unblessed... our masks still in place, sadness or shame or loneliness are still wrapped tightly around us.

**But the Good News is this:*

Jesus thinks you’re worth more than that.

Nothing is more important than you

There is nothing else that matters so much that Jesus would pass you by and leave you to fend for yourself.

Jesus is not content to see you just get a little touch to make you feel better.

He wants to see you healed and whole; strong and confident; accepted and

loved.

*He wants to do more than just close your wounds and stop the bleeding.
He wants to lead you into a wholeness you couldn't have imagined
and a fullness of life beyond your wildest dreams.**

Friends, it is there for the taking! Go ahead, push through the crowd, you may be surprised that a path will open up right to the hem of Jesus' garment. You might also hear him say to you,

*“My child, you took a risk of faith and see what it has gotten you.
Welcome back to the world of the healthy, the community of love!
May peace, health and happiness be yours,
and may what ails you, frightens you and makes you sad be gone for good.”*

The heroine of this story was told this by Jesus. She was no longer an outcast! Her 12 years on the margins of life, being cast aside and ignored was over!

Now, we know that after that encounter, she did not walk back into a perfect life, just a more fulfilled one, a life where when she walked down the street, people will ask “who is that lady” and the answer will come – she is my mother, she is a wonderful teacher, my spouse, my friend, she is a child of God – and furthermore, she was never anything less than that, even during the tough and challenging times of her life:

This is what you are invited into today. As long as the hem of His garment is there for the touching, you don't have to sneak through the crowds as an invisible outcast, you can instead step up as a full member of society, boldly with confidence into the presence of Jesus and he will offer and open himself to you, so that you might be healed by his touch, and drawn into his wholeness, and raised to new fullness in life, reconciled to him, and in him; embraced with love and acceptance always by his Beloved community... experience joy, in the morning, noon and night...no longer an outcast.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

** Portions were adapted from Nathan Nettleton, June 29, 2003 – Worth More
Than A Touch*