

“Reaching Out to Jesus” **Psalm 30; Mark 5:21-43**

After four decades as an NBC News correspondent, Bob Abernethy launched a PBS series titled *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*. One of the shows featured Abernethy’s brother, Bill, a retired pastor. Bill Abernethy had been suffering from Parkinson’s disease for more than 18 years. During the interview, the Rev. Abernethy was asked, “What goes through the mind of a religious man, when he discovers he has a disease like Parkinson’s?”

“... I don’t know,” said Abernethy. “What I found myself saying in spite of myself was, ‘God, if you can heal me, why don’t you? You have had an abundance of opportunities. I have been sick for 18 years.’ Abernethy was angry about his illness and the failed attempts at an effective treatment. And this led to some unsettling conversations with God. “It’s almost as though God would say things to me that made sense, rationally,” explained Abernethy, “but he/she said it in a tone of voice that was immensely compassionate.... And that’s been very important to me.”

Abernethy said he realized “praying for healing is one of the things Jesus (calls) us to do. But expecting that healing would automatically result, is not.” Abernethy has had to accept the limits of the human condition, because his prayers have not been answered with healing. The best he’s gotten is a sense of God’s compassion, and the notion, he says, that “God must at least be responding, ‘I wish I could have done better for you, Bill.’”

In today’s New Testament reading, the woman with the hemorrhage suffered 12 years of failed treatments – and the expense that goes along with them, and the frustration. Twelve years of medical bills; it’s enough to sap anybody’s finances, and spirits. This poor woman “had endured much under (the care of many doctors), and spent all that she had; and she was no better...” In fact, her uncontrollable bleeding was getting worse.

But throughout her ordeal, she hadn’t lost all hope. “She had heard about Jesus,” a new healer whose reputation preceded him. When Jesus arrives at her town, he’s engulfed by a crowd of people. Among them, is a religious leader named Jairus, who is gripped with fear. His daughter is deathly ill, and he falls at Jesus’ feet and begs him repeatedly to “come and lay hands on her, so that she may be made well and live.”

Jesus sets out with Jairus. And the woman with the hemorrhage sees her last best hope, moving away from her. But he’s not gone yet; there’s still hope. “If I but touch is clothes,” she says, “I will be made well.” And with that, the faith of a desperate woman brings healing. “Your faith has made you well,” declares Jesus.

Do you suppose that Jesus' healing might be more than just physical? That there's something more going on when we reach out to Jesus, and especially when Jesus reaches back to us? What happens when we reach out to Jesus? Does he always reach back to us, and if so, are there times when we fail to notice what he's offering us in our greatest time of need?

The moment the woman with the hemorrhage reaches out and touches Jesus' cloak, Jesus stops, and reaches back to her. He stops mid-stride on his way to save a dying girl. And in doing so, he's making a powerful statement: with Jesus, a one-way encounter isn't enough – even if it brings what *we* want, whether that be healing, a new job, safe travels, long life and happiness, whatever we might pray for. What is it that Jesus is reaching out to us with, when we're in the greatest need?

Some of you may have heard of the L'Arche community. If it doesn't come to mind in hearing the word, I think you'd at least recognize it. I did, while paging through a book recently. I recognized the word: L-apostrophe-capical-A-R-C-H-E – L'Arche. But I didn't know much about the communities. In their book titled “The Life of Meaning: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World,” Bob Abernethy and William Bole explain that L'Arche are communities of people with *and without* developmental disabilities, sharing in life together, living under the same roof.

The French-Canadian founder, Jean Vanier, sees these communities as “the opportunity of a lifetime – ‘to go down the social ladder, not up.’” Among the more than 100 such communities in the U.S. and around the world, there's one such community being developed not too far from us, in Georgia, where a mix of differently-abled people can experience the challenges and the blessings of doing life together, despite their differences. Abernethy and Bole explain Vanier's vision for these communities when they write, “For many years, the conventional wisdom had been that mentally disabled people should learn how to live by themselves, hold down a job, and (quote) ‘go home at night to watch television and drink beer,’ as Vanier put it. But Vanier felt that this view ignored ‘the greatest cry (of people with developmental handicaps) – and all human beings – the cry for community.’” The faith community is what Jesus reaches out to us with when we're in the greatest need.

When the woman with a hemorrhage snuck up behind Jesus, and silently touched his cloak, she might as well have been grabbing him by the shoulders and screaming into his face: Help me! Because in her silence, the woman's actions speak to Jesus about more than just her physical condition. Her silence comes from living in a society where chronic illness reflected

God's disfavor, and where touching blood – or even someone contaminated with blood – made one ritually unclean. Jesus hears her speak through the silent actions of a social outcast, and he stops to look for her, to reach out to her.

“Who touched my clothes?” he asks. “You see the crowd...,” the disciples respond. “How can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” Jesus can say, “who touched me” because Jesus knows there's a greater need than the healing of an uncontrollable hemorrhage; even though this, too, was becoming a deadly condition. The woman had exhausted all earthly remedies, and no one could stop the bleeding. If nothing was done, she most certainly would die. And yet by the time Jesus stops to look for her, the woman had already been cured. Through one touch of his cloak, the bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she had been healed. And still Jesus stops, to add his touch, to her treatment; to meet a greater need than even saving a life.

Yes, her faith had made her well, but Jesus' words restored her to her community. “Daughter,” he says to her, “... go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” By addressing her as daughter, Jesus brings her, once and for all, back into the community of faith. No one can take that away from her. No matter how poor she is or how sick she might get in the future, she will always be a daughter of Israel, a sister in faith.

This woman, who fell to her knees in the awesome awareness of Jesus' power to heal her body, received yet a greater healing. Jesus was not content to leave her physically healed and socially an outcast. I mean, think about her plight. Clearly at one point in her life, she was a woman of means. She had had the money to visit numerous physicians. She paid for all manner of treatments, until there was nothing left to try and no money left to pay for it. To leave her merely with her cure would be to leave her broke and cured of an illness that only she knew – in her silence – was cured by Jesus. She would continue to eek out a living on the fringes of society. A woman struck by an illness that hangs around *just long enough* to claim all her wealth. Even death might seem better than that.

A man and a woman, let's call them the Smiths, are standing at the pearly gates before St. Peter. They've each lived long and productive lives. Greeting them, St. Peter commends them for such exemplary lives. “Mr. and Mrs. Smith,” he says, “we've noted how generous you've been with charities. And then to go and adopted those two orphan boys Well, we'd like to send you back for as long as you'd like. We'll set you up in a condo at Pebble Beach – you do play golf, don't you? Good. Now don't worry, everything's covered – food and all your expenses. Does that sound OK?” “Heck yeah!” says Mr. Smith, and poof, there sipping highballs on

the first tee. And with that, the man turns to his wife and gives her the meanest look. “What’s that for,” she asks. “Well, if you hadn’t put us on that diet and exercise plan, we could have been here 5 years ago.”

It’s a funny way of saying it, but the point is, death isn’t the worst thing that can happen in life, and some people’s lives do seem worse than death. We’re not put on this earth to avoid injury, illness, even death. A fate worse than any of these is loneliness, isolation, and oppression. Jesus, in his earthly ministry, raised people from the dead and healed their physical maladies. But greater still, he restored them to a fullness of life in their communities – a fullness of life in Christ Jesus. While we strive to equal Jesus’ power over life and death – whether for the good, through medical advances, or for ill, through our power to make war, one nation against another – are we equally mindful of our power over loneliness, oppression, and isolation, that tendency we have to wall ourselves off from people different from us?

Our senior-high youth left for New Orleans yesterday to do what was described in the church newsletter as “a small part in rebuilding the city” – a city in which certain residents had been walled off, in effect, from those with the ability to escape a natural disaster. In addition to construction and remodeling, the youth will be reaching out to the homeless with both food *and* in leading a worship service at the homeless shelter.

It’s easy to feed the homeless – and yet as a society we fail to do so. We fail to channel enough resources to a world full of often unseen hunger and poverty. We wall ourselves off so we don’t have to be reminded of our frustration in knowing that more could be done to break down barriers in our society. Yes, it’s easy to feed the homeless. And we do that, through our Witness & Service budget and food pantry collections. But to touch these people with a warm handshake, a smile that can uplift shame-filled eyes, and a word about Jesus Christ as our one, sure hope – well that’s not so easy for most of us. Unless, I guess, you’re a senior-high youth, or youth advisor. Or a junior high, who this year mowed lawns for the elderly, visited A Child’s Haven to play with the children receiving social services there, packed groceries and stocked shelves at United Ministries and cleaned patios at the Retirement Center. We really do want to tear down the walls that isolate us from those in greatest need. But how?

The woman with the hemorrhage reached out to Jesus for what she thought was her greatest need – physical healing – and he reached back to her with spiritual healing, restoring her as a child of God and full member of her community. The healing that Jesus valued the most was the healing of her relationship with God, and her relationship with her community. And so it is with us. When we reach out to one another with healing for the physical

condition, let us be sure we do so in a way that respects *and* reaches the spiritual condition, too. Otherwise, it becomes too easy to get caught up on our own worries – if I give to him, will I have enough for me and mine; are my needs being met; am I being taken advantage of?

And yet, when we stop long enough to see the whole person – in the full context of his or her need – we may find that the physical condition is merely a symptom of an underlying malady, a social condition that has a more ready cure – if we're willing to take the time to give it. By embracing each other – even the poorest and sickest among us – with Christ-like compassion, we tap into the greatest healing power that's available to us. Jesus stopped to acknowledge a social outcast as a child of God. He held *that* as equally important – even more so – than saving one's mortal life.

We're not put here to defeat death. We're here to follow Christ's example of how to treat one another – by removing social barriers that oppress and stigmatize, by drawing near to the lonely and the sick, by empowering the poor to have a share in the economic bounty we enjoy. And for ourselves, by being open to Jesus' call upon our lives, when he reaches out to us, amid our failings and human weakness, and lifts us up as a child of God, brothers and sisters in Christ.

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