

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

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God's Pearl

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Let us pray . . .

A long time ago, a friend taught me how to shuck oysters. As I wrestled and pried open the shell, lo and behold I was interrupted by the surprise of a pearl. So, there was the story of the oyster and within the oyster, was the story of the pearl.

Think of today's lesson like that, a story within a story.

You see, on his way to restore Jairus' daughter to life, Jesus is interrupted by the hemorrhaging woman, because she too is seeking healing.

One story interrupted by the intrusion of another story — which gets to see its completion before the first story is resumed — is classic Markan writing.

Like all stories their stories share similarities:

For example, because both are desperate, Jairus and the unnamed woman take the initiative in approaching Jesus.

Both have been told by the experts that, essentially, there is no hope.

So both come to Jesus in faith because they've got nothing else.

And then of course the stories have their differences:

Jairus is named and he's a well-known religious leader in the synagogue.

His life is absorbed in the wider circles of Judaism; he's respected and

sought after. He wants Jesus' attention. He makes a big display;

publicly throwing himself at Jesus's feet, he begs him to heal his

daughter. And probably most remarkably, he's demonstrating faith not

only in another religious leader, but in one whose fellow Jews were

wanting to destroy.

But the woman? She is unnamed. Because of her hemorrhaging, she's

considered ritually unclean and so is cast out of Jewish religious and

social life. She's not respected or sought after. She does not want to gain

Jesus' attention. She desires no display. Hoping to be absorbed by the

crowd, she approaches Jesus from behind and only touches his cloak.

And most remarkably, despite all the odds being against her, she seeks

Jesus anyway.

The oyster of this story is that Jesus offer hope and healing to all who seek him — whether the very public and important or the very alone and outcast — but the pearl is that Jesus is especially tuned in to those who feel alone and outcast.

You see, despite hurrying to Jairus' home to restore a child to life, the unnamed woman is of no less importance to Jesus. He even dares to stop — when time is of the essence — to give space to find who touched his cloak.

It is this moment that reveals the significance of the interconnection between these two stories. As the editors in “Texts for Preaching” so beautifully put it: *She becomes in the text a perpetual reminder that the socially and religiously marginal have a conspicuous place in the realization of God's reign.* It is, as they write, *wholeness and restoration of enormous proportions.*

She receives restoration despite approaching Jesus from a completely empty place: Empty from a health perspective, empty financially, empty socially, and no doubt empty emotionally and psychologically.

But she approaches him anyway in faith, hope, fear . . .

In fact, as she realizes she has been found out, fearing the worst, Jesus says in verse 34 *Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.*

The story of her faith — not her status and position — is a reminder to all people and for all time that Jesus has an interruptible preference for those who are left out, marginalized and with no where else to turn.

If that is you, know that *you* especially have a distinct place in God's realm. You're God's pearl.

But let me interrupt the story line here . . . This sounds great at first passing: Faith so great that there is healing. But the point of this story isn't about faith that is so great that you get what you ask for.

No doubt we've all experienced times when, despite our greatest faithful efforts and beliefs, when we too fell to our knees, begging for healing, or when we too, whispered quietly in the dark when no one could hear us. Only we were met with silence and didn't receive the healing we so desperately asked for.

You know, in the unnamed woman's story, the word "touched" is used four times:

*Verse 27 She came up behind him in the crowd and **touched** his cloak,*

because she thought — in verse 28: *If I just **touch** his clothes, I will be healed.*

Which causes Jesus to ask in verse 30 *Who **touched** my clothes?*

Which baffles his disciples who want to know in verse 31 how he can say, *Who **touched** me?*

The Greek word for *touch* is (hap'-tom-ah-ee) *háptomai*. Here's the kicker: It refers to "touching that *influences*;" touching *someone* (or *something*) in a way that *alters, changes or modifies* them.

It seems that through her initiative, the woman touched and moved Jesus to change or alter his plan to head straight for Jairus' daughter. This interruption then led to her healing. It's the story within the story:

The touching was more than a physical healing and is the real point of the story in my view. Because of her encounter with something of God, just imagine how this woman's life is going to be going forward.

The bigger story isn't that Jesus physically healed her. It's that Jesus *saw* her in the first place. And in doing so, he restored her dignity, humanity and hope.

Because of that recognition — which she initiated by touching his cloak — he touched and healed her very soul.

That's the deep stuff right there.

That's the stuff which when — we are touched by it — is actually life-giving and life-changing.

None of us gets out of this world alive.

And as believers, we trust that there is more that we have come from, belong to and to which we will return. We certainly don't fully understand it or know it — not by a long shot and despite my best efforts to figure it out for you — and yet, even when we can't quite put it into words, we know what we are trying to touch, just as Jairus and the

woman knew when they reached out to Jesus. And we know what it feels like when our souls have been touched by the Divine.

As I said, the center of this story is that God holds a preferential tenderness for those who are left outside of the constructs of this world.

And as to all of us?

I think the rest of the surrounding story's point is ultimately about the restorative power of the interrupting touch of God.

Whether we meet God directly or meet God through the mercy or compassion extended to us through another soul, we know when we have encountered the Divine — something that gives us hope, restores our dignity, strengthens our faith, brings us peace or shows us love.

It's a different kind of healing, but it is the kind of healing that can save you from despair just the same.

Beloveds, I get that these ancient stories often feel so far away that you might think they are just that, ancient stories. But remember that we tell and retell them as part of our shared stories in connection with God.

So as you begin a new week, my prayer for you is that you take the time to reflect on a story in your life where you feel you knew something of God's interruption.

Maybe it was a straight up for real healing in answer to a desperate prayer . . .

Or maybe it was a different kind of life-giving encounter, where you experienced the touch of mercy, grace, love, peace or hope.

Whatever it was or is or has yet to be, may you rest in the peace that like a pearl within an oyster, that because of God, Jairus and the unnamed woman's stories are right there with yours.

Amen