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The Fringe of His Garment

Mark 5: 25-34

I account the woman of this story lucky because she was fortunate enough to know that she needed help. There were plenty of people in her own time (as there are many in ours) meandering through life, losing their vitality every minute of existence, ceaselessly leaking enthusiasm and purpose, desperately needing guidance, direction, healing and redemption – but they knew it not.

This woman at least knew that she needed healing.

She had been bleeding for twelve straight years, and no physician had been able to offer her a cure.

Naturally, she had become emaciated and anemic, listless and lethargic.

But she needed more than a physical cure. As weak as she was of body, she was also scarred of soul.

Accompanying her devastating physical decline, she had also been accounted by others as cursed by God. She had known social banishment. She had been ostracized by her religion and shunned by her culture, marked as one who was considered unclean and profane, clearly a sinner.

So she needed more than a physical cure. She needed the spiritual power of redemption.

She needed a change of heart. She needed a different outlook.

So she came to our Lord somewhat surreptitiously seeking to touch the fringe of his garment.

She sought to connect to the reality of the spiritual dimension.

She sought to connect to the divine energy of vitality that would give her direction, purpose and joy again.

She sought to connect anew to the great themes of existence.

How often in the past few months I have pondered the image of this hemorrhaging woman!

For she has provided me with an answer to a question that I have asked myself

as I have visited in diverse houses of worship. Over the past few months

I have sat in traditional African-American services, swaying to the bluesy singing of powerful hymns.

I've sat in school auditoriums so packed with young people that I almost had to fight to find a seat.

I've sat in darkened theatres where the music was provided by a rocking band led by a killer lead guitarist.

As I've sat in these sundry places I have asked myself the question, "Why am I here?"

The partial answer is, I have sought to learn how worship is done in the modern world – and I must admit that I have received an exhilarating, if thoroughly humbling, education.

But that answer only superficially satisfied my inquiry.

For what I was really asking was, "Why are any of us here? Why have any of us bothered to rise

out of our beds and leave our houses to gather for fellowship in the Lord's house, whether that

sacred house was a stained-glass sanctuary or a gymnasium with black cloth hung over the windows?"

The answer was provided by the hemorrhaging woman.

We come to a sacred place in order to connect with the reality of God's great power.

We come to a sacred place in order to connect to God's great themes of living.

We come to a sacred place in order to be filled with the divine Spirit and to be filled with the energy of a Presence that gives us a direction and sense of purpose that we can find nowhere else on earth.

We gather in what we regard as holy places to connect with the reality of spiritual energy and be oriented toward the spiritual goals that make our life worth living.

That is why we come to touch the fringe of our Lord's garment, to be filled with the reality of His power.

Of course, there are those who say that the impulse that drives this woman to seek the presence of Jesus is a vain illusion that can result in no true satisfaction.

I think of the biologist Stephen Jay Gould who has opined that humanity only exists

because out of the primordial muck happened to emerge a type of fish with the sort of mutant fins that could over the course of a thousand accidental evolutionary permutations eventuate into the two-legged creature that we call a human being.

Gould said, "We may feel an urge toward some higher meaning and purpose, but there is none."

But the scientist is only half right – and thus all wrong. He is half-right in this:

to be a human is to feel an urge toward a higher meaning and purpose, to connect with the transcendent.

However much he has dismissed that impulse, even that atheistic scientist has surely felt

that urge to seek a higher meaning and purpose. Indeed, I say to you boldly:

the urge to connect to the realm of the Spirit and the urge to be filled with spiritual power and the urge to connect to life's great themes are the fundamental characteristics of what it means to be human.

You might respond, 'Dr. Kremer, how can you say such a thing? Look around you.

There is not that much reverence for life, there is not much awe in the face of the sacred.'

At one level that is certainly true. Yet I say to you boldly again, *even those who claim to be irreligious pay unconscious tribute to the purposefulness and reverential nature of existence.*

Even those who claim to disbelieve in God tacitly admit life's divine imprint.

Consider this image from Northern Illinois University a few days after a crazed student's shooting spree had left dead and wounded spread across that campus.

The scene is a gym, the occasion is a basketball game, the time is moments before tip-off.

Yet before that ball can be tipped, everyone feels a need to acknowledge the sacred, fragile nature of life.

Before the crowd can scream over something as ultimately irrelevant as shots and steals, some gesture must be made to acknowledge the holiness of existence and the meaningfulness of the lives that were lost.

Even those who do not believe in God bow their heads in tribute to those slain students and teachers.

If life is essentially meaningless, truly there would be no need to honor these people's memories!

If life is without purpose then their deaths are not profoundly tragic!

Yet everyone in that gymnasium knows in the heart of their being that such is not the case.

So everyone stands for a moment with their heads bowed in a moment of silent tribute to the slain.

Whether they realize it or not, they are engaging in an essentially spiritual act.

If they pause later to ask in wonder, 'Why does the death of my fellow students and teachers,

even if they were strangers to me, cause me to engage in this essentially religious act?' my answer is,

'Because each life and all life and this entire cosmos in which this drama we call life plays itself out bears the mark of the Sacred One who calls us to come touch the fringe of his garment.'

I'll make another statement, equally bold:

that we are created by the Spirit of a higher purpose and are intended to serve that higher purpose is evidenced powerfully by the fact that when we do not channel our impulse

for ultimate meaning in the right direction, we will invariably channel it in the wrong one.

I can restate the same truth bluntly: our irreligious age has turned every common urge into a religion.

We have attempted to transform every human appetite, every human activity, into an avocation, in truth, into a substitute for God.

You don't believe me? Turn on your television.

You like sports? There are sports networks airing twenty-four hours, constantly replaying the same news, so hungry for novelty at they will instantly broadcast the slightest rumor simply to satisfy the insatiable appetite of their public for some new tidbit.

You like golf? There is a golf network runs twenty-four hours, mostly spent hawking absolutely essential products promising instantly to turn us all into Tiger Woods.

You like politics? Then you are one sick puppy –

but there are a half-dozen networks willing to scratch your every itch for the latest campaign developments.

We live in a world where people actually care how long it takes an East Carolina running back to run the forty-yard dash, and there are people who will speak for twenty minutes on the "significance" of how his time will

impact his position in the NFL draft, and there are people, millions, actually, who will listen to that discussion. There is actually a group that has turned politics into a fantasy game, where you actually select politicians for your squad, like sports fans have done with baseball and football.

I don't know how it works. I don't want to know how it works!

But my point is this: every menial pursuit has been turned into some kind of game and every game has been turned into some kind of faith.

In so doing we are trying in the feeblest fashion to satisfy our urge to touch the fringe of the garment of that which is highest and most profound.

We feel the call to channel our dearest allegiances toward that which is highest, yet we respond by directing our energies instead toward that which is shallow.

This woman knows that only the highest reality can satisfy her deepest need.

She is like that Psalmist who in his own desperation declares, "I look to the hills.

Whence cometh my strength? My strength comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth."

My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth!

This woman and the Psalmist know that only the highest reality can satisfy their deepest quest.

In so doing the Psalmist and the woman are not only saying something about the nature of humanity.

In their looking to the highest purpose, they are also saying something about the nature of God.

There is not only something in our nature that makes us look to the God who made heaven and earth.

There is also something about our God who is reaching out to us in response to our searching.

In some of the churches I've attended the preachers actually show movie clips as sermon illustrations. I've come to like it. Now I have movie envy.

Since I can't show you a film clip I'll just have to tell you about a scene in a Harry Potter movie where young Harry is facing a basilisk, a huge snake with fatally venomous eyes and bite.

In his dire moment of need Harry remembers something that his headmaster Dumbledore said to him: "Help will always be given at Hogwarts to those who ask for it."

Sure enough, in Harry's hour of need a phoenix flies in from nowhere to blind the basilisk.

Out of a floppy hat comes a sword with which he can kill the beast. When Harry suffers a deadly wound the phoenix returns to cry healing tears upon his injury and redeem him from death.

He comes to realize that his environment is a place designed to provide him help in times of need.

Why does the woman come seeking to touch the fringe of our Lord's garment?

Because she realizes that ours is a universe so structured that help will be given to those who seek it.

Our Lord says, "Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you shall find. Knock and it shall be opened to you." When we find ourselves desperate, when we find ourselves needy, when we find ourselves searching for wholeness, our universe is a place where help will be provided to those who seek it.

If we can understand that truth about our world, my friends, then we can open our lives to such great faith!

To seek the highest reality in response to our deepest need is not only a statement about human nature, but it is a statement about the nature of the God who fashioned and sustains this world.

Help will be given to those who seek it!

The only reason we come to this holy place, or to any holy place, is to touch the fringe of our Lord's garment and be filled with the reality of God's presence, to be energized by the vitality of God's Spirit, and to be impelled by the reality of God's great themes.

We come, drawn by the notion that God's help will come to those who seek it.

Some of you are here though you believe nothing. You are here out of curiosity or habit.

Some of you are here, though you doubt more than you believe.

Some of you here are spiritually anemic. You've been leaking spiritual vitality for a long time.

Your joy, your love, your patience, your faith has been ebbing incessantly since you don't know when.

Some of you have come seeking that which is theologically new and fashionable,

when in fact there is nothing more exciting than the old Gospel truth that if anyone is in Christ he or she is being made a new creature. Anyone who is in Christ is being made a new creature! What could be more exciting than that? The truth is, no matter where you are in your faith, the Christ invites us to come touch the hem of his garment and begin the process of moving to a different level of spiritual maturity. Our ambition must be to come unto our Lord with courage, humility and hope and touch the fringe of his garment, so that we might hear him say to us, "Your faith has made you whole." All of us need to hear our Lord's pronouncement over us: "Your faith has made you whole."

I could stop here. I probably should. But I want to add one word, one story more. I was in Mobile, Alabama not long ago, and I stopped outside a military museum that housed all manner of retired ships and sophisticated fighter planes of every description. But all I wanted to see was a crude little craft less than forty feet long, no more than forty-eight inches high. For you and me, it would have been like crawling inside a tire, and I daresay we could not have stayed in it more than a half hour at best. Yet in truth, nine men sat inside this little craft for hours, eight of them peddling to provide the power of motion, while the ninth man steered. This would have been a horrible place to sit even for an hour. It would have been a ghastly place to die. Yet the nine men inside this vessel knew that such would probably be their fate. The first two prototypes had sunk with all their crews, and those boats were not carrying a bomb. This one was. Yes, I'm talking about the Confederate submarine known as the *Hundley*, which made its way into Charleston harbor and became the first submarine in the history of warfare to sink a ship. Yet their bomb sank not only the ship, but also their sub in the process. One cannot imagine what the terrifying last seconds of those men's lives must have been like as they drowned in that sinking crypt. As many of you know, that little crypt remained hidden and undisturbed in the silt of Charleston harbor for over a century until a few years ago, when it was located and raised, and the remains of the crew were interred amidst pomp and circumstance. Why? Why did people turn out in great numbers to commemorate their achievement? The war in which they fought had long been lost. The cause for which they died had long been discredited. Yet they were laid to rest in honor because they gave their lives to do something that had never been done before. They made the ultimate sacrifice to do something bold and intrepid and to expand the boundaries of the possible. That same impulse runs in all of us. God has placed it there. The Spirit of God gives us impulse to be bold and intrepid and to stretch the bonds of the possible.

The advent of God into our lives is the beginning of all true adventures. These adventures are not always fun, but they are always meaningful, always necessary, and, ultimately, always revelatory. Along the way, all of us must come to understand that we live by the power and energy of love that flows into our lives from the fringe of our Master's garment. For this power and energy we must always hunger. May we ache to hear these words of our Lord said to us: "Your faith has made you whole."

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