

7 interview characters

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HEALING DAUGHTERS

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Pastor, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on June 29, 2003.

Scripture: Mark 5:21-43

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

One of life's most dreaded experiences is isolation. I read an article on the Internet last week about the isolation felt by some prisoners in Japan. Human rights organizations have found that solitary confinement in a Japanese penitentiary can last for decades. At least 30 prisoners in Japanese jails have been in solitary confinement for at least 10 years; totally separated from other prisoners.

Our Gospel lesson tells a story of a woman condemned to solitary confinement for 12 years. That's not what the Bible says directly but if we read between the lines we discover that she really was condemned to solitary confinement. Mark tells us "there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years." Isn't it strange that the Bible talks about problems like that? Her condition wasn't unique. It may have been more common than we think because the Bible says in the Old Testament book of Leviticus that women in her condition must be placed in solitary confinement. "If a woman has a discharge of blood for many day all the days of the discharge *she shall continue in uncleanness.*" What does that mean – *uncleanness*? God's people were instructed to shun unclean things, so it means she must live in solitary confinement as long as her condition lasts. She had to live outside the city. She had to leave her family. *Her condition also cuts her off from God.* She couldn't enter a synagogue or the temple. She couldn't carry out the required sacrifices. *She was isolated from God and society,* condemned to solitary confinement for as long as she suffered from her condition.

The Bible goes on to say, "If she is cleansed of her discharge, she shall count seven days, and after that she shall be clean. On the eighth day she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons and bring them to the priest and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf before the Lord for her unclean discharge. *The priest shall offer one for a sin offering.*" Why a sin offering? Because she was considered a sinner – simply because she had a flow of blood.

If the woman had obeyed the Word of God she wouldn't have been in that crowd. If the crowd had known her condition they would have shunned and avoided her. She had to keep her condition in the closet in

order to touch Jesus. That's why the woman was so afraid when she was discovered. Mark tells us that "the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before Jesus, and told him the whole truth." Once she was discovered, she feared the crowd would turn on her, even kill her – because she wasn't obeying the Bible. She also feared God's curse. You see – if the woman had obeyed the Bible she wouldn't have been there – because the Bible said she should be confined.

What Jesus did on this occasion was typical of his attitude to what the Bible says about uncleanness. We find him touching and being touched by unclean people – like lepers, dead people, and the most despised sinners. His actions demonstrated that with his coming, a new age has dawned. Jesus, in affect, ignored what the Bible said about uncleanness – at least he ignored how the religious leaders of his day interpreted the Bible.

In some respects people with AIDS find themselves in the same boat with the woman suffering from hemorrhages. Some people feel that AIDS is a curse and people with AIDS should be excluded from society. We're often afraid to touch or be touched by someone with AIDS. Several years ago Kay and I had friends who had AIDS. Years before, Luz had been a foreign exchange student in the home of Kay's parents. Years later, she and her husband moved to NY City. She was dying and wanted to come to Lewistown to say goodbye to her American family. We were initially alarmed – we'd never had contact with someone with AIDS. Kay's father called the family doctor. "Can you get AIDS by touching?" "No!" So when Luz and Louie arrived, and they reached out to embrace us, we embraced and kissed them. Our embraces didn't physically heal Luz and Louie but there was spiritual healing, the spiritual healing that comes when an outcast is welcomed.

The woman suffering from hemorrhages was healed when she reached out and touched Jesus. The doctors couldn't heal her. She couldn't heal herself. But Jesus healed her. But she was healed at quite a price for Jesus because when she touched Jesus, Jesus was made unclean because the Bible says, again in Leviticus, that whoever touches or is touched by a hemorrhaging woman is made unclean and must be condemned to solitary confinement. Jesus became ritually unclean when the woman touched him. According to the law, Jesus should have been excluded from the synagogues and banished to the wilderness – in fact, we know that's exactly what happened at the end of his earthly ministry. But Jesus was willing to take upon himself the woman's uncleanness and become cursed in order to heal her.

There are so many people bleeding today. Often they don't feel welcome in church. Often friends and family reject them. There are churches where, if you're single, or childless, or divorced, or guilty of a sin considered more heinous than others, you're shunned. The church bulletin board says, "All are welcome" but unwritten signs say, "If you're not married, if you don't have children, if you don't share our political and theological views – you're not welcome. If you're too fat or thin, too rich or poor, too uneducated or educated, too liberal or conservative, too sophisticated or uncouth stay away." I think of times I've said things from the pulpit that have hurt people. I don't think I've meant to be malicious – perhaps just extremely thoughtless. I feel sad and I'm ashamed when I realize words I've spoken have made some people feel unwelcome.

Is there someone here this morning bleeding? You dare not let anyone know your condition because you fear rejection. If people knew you were bleeding you fear people would shun you. Doctors haven't helped. But you're here to touch Christ with the hope you'll be healed. You've come because you believe the church is where we touch Jesus and he touches us. But maybe it's more true to say that wherever we touch Christ, there is the true church. Where Christ is known, where Christ is found, and where Christ is touched is where the real church is - made up of real people; made up of sinful people. Here in this place, through the sacraments, through all the human interactions of the body of Christ, I hope and pray that someone will reach out and make contact with the risen Christ.

All of us are like the woman suffering from hemorrhages. We're all unclean until cleansed by the blood of Christ. One New Testament writer said, "if we walk in the light as Jesus himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." Another NT writer said, "in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." The woman's flow of blood made her unclean but the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin. One of the Church's greatest hymn writers wrote, "Christ breaks the power of reigning sin, And sets the prisoner free; Christ's blood can make the sinful clean, Christ's blood availed for me."

Mighty and merciful God, you sent Jesus Christ to heal broken lives. We praise you that today you send healing in doctors and nurses and bless us with technology in medicine. We claim your promises of wholeness as we pray for those ill in body or mind, who long for your healing touch. Make the weak strong, the sick healthy, the broken whole, and confirm those who serve them as agents of your love. Then all shall be renewed in health to point to the risen Christ who conquered death that we might live eternally. Amen.