

The crowds were pressing upon Jesus. People were following him through the streets of the village of Capernaum, when suddenly Jesus stopped, turned, and said: “Someone has touched me.”

She had been sick for a long time. For 12 years she had what the Bible calls “an issue of blood.” It was not fatal. It was chronic. It did not get better. It gradually got worse. Day in and day out she hurt.

She had been to every doctor in the region and according to the Gospel of Mark, “she had suffered much at the hands of many physicians.” I find it interesting that when Luke tells this story in his Gospel, he omits that part. I suspect that is because Luke was a physician and he didn’t want to slander his profession. I can understand that. Today doctors and hospitals can do amazing things and I am thankful for all the healers in our midst. But 2000 years ago medicine was not what it is today. She had been to all the doctors, she had tried every remedy, she had spent all her money, and she was no better for it.

But as terrible as it must have been to have been sick for so long, I think that her deepest pain would have been emotional and spiritual. According to the 15th chapter of the Book of Leviticus, people who had her condition were considered to be unclean.

Do you know what it was like to be pronounced unclean in Jesus’ day? For starters, no one could touch her – because if you touched a person who was unclean, then you would become unclean yourself. No one could enter her room; no one could share a meal with her. She could not even go to the synagogue to worship God because, more than being a health issue, in those days people believed that God would have nothing to do with someone who was unclean. So, for 12 years she had been cut off, isolated, and abandoned. Some today some would say, “How could anyone be so cruel?” It happens.

In 1986, I lived in Durham, North Carolina. One afternoon I came home and found my neighbor wanting to talk with me. He was upset. He was angry. He had heard through the grapevine that a child in the Durham School System had tested positive for AIDS. “Well, I wouldn’t let my children go to a school where people have AIDS!” He didn’t have children but that didn’t stop him. “We’ve got to do something!” he said. Recognizing the complexity of the situation, I asked, “What do you think we should do?” “I don’t know,” he said, “send them away somewhere. Put them in a place where they can’t contaminate anyone.” When he saw the look on my face, he said, “Look – this is God’s judgment...” He turned it into a religious issue. How do you respond to something like that? I borrowed a quote from John Wesley, saying, “Sir, your god is my devil.”

It was 1986. The news of this disease was first coming out, people were frightened, and understandably so. But the thought that kept coming to my mind was that somewhere in the city of Durham there was a child who was hurting. In our passage of

scripture this morning Jesus Christ encountered a woman who had something like AIDS. She was unclean.

Somehow she had heard that a new teacher was in town. Everyone was talking about Him. Everyone was asking questions: “Who is this man who teaches with such authority? Who is that man that even the unclean spirits obey Him? Who is this man who can heal with a touch?” Hers’ was an answer of faith. “Surely, He must be the promised one – the Christ who has come to deliver us.” In the silence of her hidden room she thought: “He has touched others, if only he could touch me.”

But that was the problem. No one could touch her! It was forbidden. I believe that for 12 years this woman had been so mentally, spiritually, and emotionally abused that she had come to the point where she believed that even the Son of God would not touch her.

I think of Edmund Spenser. Edmund Spenser was one of the top three poets in English literature: Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Spenser. They say that he died on King Street (one of the well-to-do streets in London) “for the lack of bread.” How could this have happened to someone like Edmund Spenser?

Well, Spenser was political. He was an advocate for the colonization of Ireland. When the Irish wars became politically unpopular, he fell out of favor with the Queen’s court. No one wanted to have anything to do with Edmund Spenser. When they found him on King Street they took him to the hospital. The doctors did not know who he was. They thought he was a street person. The doctors conferred with one another in Latin. In those days only educated people spoke Latin. They said: “we could do this and we could do that, but supplies are low and medicine is expensive.” Thinking it was a privet conversation; one doctor asked the other: “Do you think he is really worth it?”

When Edmund Spenser heard this, he realized that no one was going to help him. So he got up to leave the hospital room. But before he walked out the door, he pointed to a cross on the wall, and said to the doctors in perfect Latin: “Call no man unworthy (call no one unworthy) for whom Christ died.”

Friends, none of us deserve God’s love. But because of God’s love, no one is undeserving of ours. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son...” With a price tag like that, you know that each and every one of us is precious to God.

I believe that this woman had been so mistreated that she had come to the point where she felt worthless. She had come to believe that no one would help her. But then the thought came to her: *if he will not touch me, then maybe I could touch him. Perhaps in the midst of the crowd I could slip up behind him and no one would know. I would not have to touch him - if I could just touch his robe - if I could just touch the hem of his garment.*

The streets of Capernaum were packed that day. Large crowds were following every step that Jesus took. Suddenly Jesus stopped, turned, and said: “Someone has touched me.” The disciples said: “Lord, you see the crowd. People are everywhere. Of course someone touched you.” “No,” said Jesus, “someone has touched me.” And as he searched the faces he saw her, and she fell to her knees trembling with fear.

How did Jesus respond? Did he say: “Woman, how dare you touch me? We don’t know about your condition. You could be contagious.” Or did he say, “Look woman, I don’t know what your problem is but obviously this is God’s judgment against you.” No – with one word he changed her life. There in the streets of the city of Capernaum, Jesus looked into her eyes and said: “Daughter...” It is the only time in the New Testament that Jesus used that word. He said “Daughter...” and in that word he said, *you are not an unclean to me. You are not untouchable to God. You are a precious daughter to me.*

In Margery Williams’s children’s story: *The Velveteen Rabbit*; the hobby horse said to the rabbit, “If you want to be real, you have to be touched. Not just touched... but loved. Once you are really loved, then you can’t be ugly, except to those who don’t understand.” After 12 years of physical, spiritual, and emotional pain, this woman experienced the love of Christ. Jesus said: “Daughter, your faith has made you whole.”

Some of you know that I play the violin – or more accurately, the fiddle. Years ago I was at a pawn shop here in Charlotte. They had all the newer violins on the wall and underneath the display was a box with a beat up old violin in it. The owner was selling it for the parts and he wanted \$60. So, I bought it and took it to a violin maker who put it back together and told me that it was a German violin made between 1780 and 1790, and he offered me \$5000 on the spot for it. And I was happy. But then I realized that I did not want to sell it. This was a rare find and I did not want to let it go. Do you know what it is like to have something that you love that is very precious?

Myra Brooks Welch did and she put it to poetry.

It was battered and scared and the old auctioneer thought it hardly worth his while,
to waist much time on the old violin, but he held it up with a smile.
What are my offers, good folks, cried he. Who will start my bidding for me?
A dollar, then two. Only two? Who will make it three?
Three dollars once, three dollars, twice, and going and going cried he.

But no, from the room far back a grey haired man, came forward and picked up the bow.
He tightened the hair and opened the case and held up the fiddle so.
Then he wiped the dust from the old violin and tightened the old loose strings,
and played a melody, soft and sweet, as the caroling angels sing.

When the music ceased, the auctioneer, in a voice that was quiet and low,
Said, “What are my bids for the old violin? And he held it up with the bow.
A thousand dollars? Two thousand? Who will make it three?
Three thousand once, three thousand twice, and going and gone cried he.
And the people all cheered, but some of them cried, “We don’t quite understand,”
“What changed the worth of the old violin? Twas the touch of the Master’s hand.

(Here is the point of the poem)

Many are those who life’s out of tune and battered and scared by sin.

They are auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd much like the old violin.
A mess of porridge, a glass of wine, and game and they travel on.
They are going once, they are going twice, they are going and almost gone.

But then the Master comes, and the thoughtless crowd, can never quite understand.
The worth of a soul and the change that is wrought
by the touch of the Master's hand.

Our story this morning tells me that we are all precious to God. It tells me that none of us are untouchable to the Master. It tells me that it is our faith in Him that makes us whole.

I don't know what you may be going through this morning but I know that there are many ways that we struggle. For some it may be physical, for others it may be emotional or mental or struggling with relationships. The book of James tells us that if anyone is going through something like this, then we are to pray and to anoint with oil. I want to offer that to you. At the conclusion of our service we will invite those who want to come forward to do so and we will make the sign of the cross on your forehead, lay hands on you, and pray for you. I want to do this because the bible tells us to do this. If no one comes forward that is fine. If everyone comes forward that is fine because we all need wholeness in our lives. Most of all, I don't know what God is going to do with this. But, if we reach out to him maybe today He will reach out to us saying, "Daughter, your faith has made you whole."