



A Woman Known Only By Her Illness

TEXT
Mark 5:25–34

July 7, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Jesus is on his way to Jairus' home. Jairus' daughter is ill and dying. Jairus has nowhere else to turn, so in desperation, he reaches out to Jesus. I've got a daughter. I get it. Jesus stops what he is doing and heads to Jairus' house.

But along the way, a woman touches his clothes. "Who touched me?" he asked. That's the question. And who is this woman, really?

I was at Montreat a couple weeks ago — just in to preach on Sunday. I saw professors from college. I saw friends from seminary. I saw friends from three of the four churches I have served. I saw people who knew me as a student and as a pastor, as a friend. But this also happened. "You are Sarah's dad." "You are Nathan's dad." Our kids have provided more leadership at Montreat in the last decade than I have. So, I was the Dad. I was proud to be known in just that way. Yet, as grateful as I am to be known by any of these means, I'm not sure it's the best description. Who am I, really?

Jesus asks, "Who touched me?" The text tells us who she is. She is a woman with a history. For 12 years, she'd suffered from hemorrhaging. That's her history.

She has gone to doctor after doctor, which left her broken and broke. Her particular condition also means that socially she is unclean. Her faith forbids her from touching another person, for if she does, she makes them unclean.

She not only endures physical pain, but she is ostracized because of her illness. Over time, this is who she becomes. She is just a sick woman. And the irony of it all, the community believed that is how God sees her. So, to ostracize her, well, that was the right thing. She didn't just have a disease; the disease had her. Who is this woman? She is sick.

Too often the world defines us by what's wrong with us. So often the brokenness in us, the failure in us, the flaws in us, define us. Sometimes we do that to ourselves. We can't shake the worst things we have done, and we believe that is who we are.

That was her narrative. But this nameless woman displays remarkable courage. She imagines becoming a different person. She imagines a different definition for herself. "If I can just touch his clothes, I will be healed ... just his clothes."

She does. And she is. And Jesus answers his own question: "Who touched me? Oh, it's you,

my daughter," he says. In these words, the world changes. This is who she is. She is Christ's own daughter.

So often the stories of scripture tell of great transformation in an instant. We see transformation from outcast to included; from ill to healed; from broken to redeemed. I've seen transformation in this world as well, but it almost never happens in an instant.

But we should not misread this story. When we meet this woman, she is already reaching for Jesus' robe. But if I understand the text, this moment followed a long journey. For 12 years, she has been seeking healing. For 12 years, she has been trying to become someone other than a hemorrhaging woman. It took courage to imagine she could be something other than how the world defined her. She is transformed, but it doesn't happen in an instant. It's a long journey.

Educated is the memoir of Tara Westover. It's quite a story. She grew up in the mountains of Idaho, one of seven children. Her father was a fundamentalist Mormon who prepared his family for the end of days. They buried canned peaches and built bunkers. None of the kids went

to school or saw a doctor because the government was the enemy. The house was filled with fear and threats, with mental illness and violence. She was steeped in this libertarian, fundamentalist, fearful and angry world.

But by age 27, this young woman, who had grown up all but hidden from the world, earns a Ph.D. from Cambridge — a pretty remarkable feat, given that the first classroom she ever entered was a college class at BYU. Her pursuit of education estranged her from her family, who said that she was putting her mortal soul in peril, learning the words of man rather than the word of God. But she persisted, living toward a future she imagined but had never seen. She said the hardest part was, the identity her family had given her was oppressive, and as painful as her past had been, it still took tremendous courage to imagine a new self, a new day for herself. She had to leave the person of her childhood behind. She described her journey this way:

I was a “changed person: a new self. You could call that selfhood many things. Transformation. Metamorphosis. Betrayal. I call it an education.”¹

Tara Westover is a woman of courage; she reminds me of this woman. Because this woman refuses to accept the narrative the world has determined for her. She will not be defined by her brokenness. She will not be defined by what’s wrong with her. She is Christ’s own daughter.

I’m a pastor and a father. I’m a man who loves to read and build furniture. I’ve gone to

school and gotten a few traffic tickets. I’ve failed at times. I’ve embarrassed my kids ... and on occasion enjoyed that. I’ve embarrassed myself ... and never enjoyed that. I married “up” as they say where I’m from — and that fact is actually recorded in the Session minutes of the Riverside Church in Florida. “Tom Are married up.” All of that is part of my story. It’s my history.

But when it comes to answering Jesus’ question, “Who are we?” our history is always going to be incomplete. Like this woman, if we are going to name who we really are, our identity rests not in our past, but in God’s future. We are God’s children, and we are living toward the day when that is clear to us and to all.

This week I reviewed Jon Meacham’s book *The Soul of America*. It’s good to think about the American soul. With the cookouts and the fireworks and the parades, it might be tempting to think of ourselves as the beacon of capitalism, a people defined by economics. Capitalism is the religion of many — or as the superpower, at least for a season. American exceptionalism is a doctrine for many.

But let’s take Jesus’ question. Who is America? That’s a question of the soul. We are a nation of ideals and great people; of Jefferson and Lincoln, of Harriet Tubman and Susan B. Anthony. But our history is complicated. Before the colonies became a nation, we were building our identity on the backs of slaves. We thought it necessary, and some Presbyterians said slavery was what God intended.

And in the earliest days of our nation, we engaged in what can reasonably be called ethnic cleansing, as we removed the people who occupied these lands before us. We kept their names ... Cherokee and the Shawnee and such ... but we drove the people from their homes. Some said it was necessary, and many said it was the right thing to do.

In the midst of this work was Andrew Jackson. He ran for President as an evangelist for the common man. But when Jackson said the common man, he meant the common white man. For Jackson, the soul of America was white. He held a violent animosity for slaves, Native Americans and women.²

He was zealous for the Indian Removal Act. On May 17, 1830, a congressman from Georgia named Wilson Lumpkin stood before the congress to support the Indian Removal Act. What struck me were his reasons for supporting this bill. He said, “Do not do this for the sake of Georgians ... oh no, they could take care of themselves ... but for the sake of the Cherokee, for as a lesser people, they would not benefit from increasing contact with the superior white race. And the good people of Georgia could only be expected to extend benevolence for so long.”

Make them leave; it’s for their own good. Congressman Lumpkin expressed his racist venom and made it sound morally superior at the same time. That’s easy to do when we can define people by what we think is wrong with them; what we think their failing might be.

Like the people of Jesus' day who assumed that God wanted a sick woman to be ostracized, we have our own stories that do harm, while we tell ourselves that it is good.

That's why looking back at these stories of scripture and looking back at these stories of America are important.

As Jon Meacham says, "We look to history not to hold up our forebears or founding fathers as gods. They were great men, but like all people they were people of their time. They were wrong about things, and subsequent generations have had to fix their flaws. No, we don't sanctify the past. Nor do we look down on them in condescension, as if simply living in a different time makes us somehow more righteous. No, we look to learn from them, and what the past teaches us is that every generation has to battle for what Lincoln called our better angels."³ It is a battle for our souls.

If I understand this text, it teaches us not to settle for the narrative the world tells us, but to look forward to God's promised day. For what is true for you and me is also true for America. America is not defined by our past, but by God's future. America is not in our past; America is still becoming. There is a way of being with one another that we have yet to see, but a way of being with one another we are called to embody. And to live toward that day will take courage.

In 1924, Clarence Darrow found the American spotlight when he defended two college students charged with the murder

of a 14-year-old boy. As the trial concluded, Darrow gave his closing argument. They say it lasted 12 hours. You thought sermons were long.

He said this: "I am pleading for life, understanding, charity and kindness, and the infinite mercy that forgives all. I am pleading that we overcome cruelty with kindness and hatred with love. ...

"I am pleading for the future; I am pleading for a time when hatred and cruelty will not control the hearts of men. When we can learn by reason and judgment and understanding and faith that all life is worth saving, and that mercy is the highest attribute."⁴

In a couple of paragraphs, Clarence Darrow summed up 30 years of preaching. Every week I am pleading for the future — for you and me, for America, for the world to set aside the narratives that have divided us, that have demeaned us, that are destroying us. I am pleading for the future where we are all defined by the dreams God has for us.

That's why I love this woman who just knew, if she could just touch his clothes, she would be who God made her to be. We can't touch his clothes, but we can touch his words or let them touch us ... and the truth of who we are can emerge. For in his words, we hear him pleading for the future.

¹Tara Westover, *Educated* (2018), p. 329

²Jerimi Suri, *The Impossible Presidency* (2017), p. 53

³Jon Meacham, *The Soul of America* (2018), p. 259

⁴Clarence Darrow, *Plea for Leopold and Loeb* <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/?s=darrow>

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.