

"Bloody Jesus"

A meditation based on Psalm 130 and Mark 5:21-43

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Redlands United Church of Christ

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"Out of the depths," the psalmist cries out to God. Time, distance, and lack of written record prevent us from knowing to what crisis the psalmist was referring. She may have been speaking quite personally of a medical procedure gone awry; a family member no longer communicating; a painful death of a dear friend; a bad day at the office. Or perhaps he was speaking more globally of some trauma affecting the community as a whole: strained relationships with the neighboring tribe; another oppressive invader; one more empire with which to contend; crops ruined by weather. We do not know the content that swirled around the psalmist while he or she was in the depths, nor does it really much matter. For the human experience of being "in the depths" is a universal one...we feel cut off, from others, from our best selves, and perhaps, even, from our God. Alone and often without a clear vision of the future, we, too, cry out to our God:

- Out of the depths of injustice, O God, we long for equal marriage to be the law of the land.
- Out of the depths of inequity, O God, we long for Wal-Mart workers to have rights assumed by other workers in our great nation.
- Out of the depths of warfare, O God, we long for the people of Iran and the people of Afghanistan and the people of Iraq to have their countries back...in peace.
- Out of the depths of famine and disease, O God, we long for the communities on the African continent to be well and whole and fed.
- Out of the depths of hurricanes and tornadoes and earthquakes, we long for homes and businesses and lives to be rebuilt.

Friends in faith, each week in this sacred place we hear at a personal level the voices of our sisters and brothers, crying out to God out of the depths of illness, of sadness, of grief, of pain, of anxiety, of

fear. And as we hear, as we open ourselves to these voices, we join God in providing a safe space, a loving place for hope to bloom.

The psalmist concludes the psalm with words we affirmed together this morning: "Our hope is in God! For with God there is steadfast love, and with God is great power to redeem...It is God who will redeem us from all our iniquities." That Hebrew word translated "steadfast love" is the word *hesed*, and it is used dozens of times throughout the Hebrew scriptures. According to Rabbi Harold Kamsler who wrote about *hesed* in *The Jewish Bible Quarterly*, the word describes a mutual relationship between humans and between humans and God. The closest English word for *hesed* is loyalty, which conjures up the sort of relationship upon which we can depend, no matter what. When used of human interactions, *hesed* describes kindness done to those who are in need, actions that favor and benefit other humans, and the like. When used of the interaction between God and humanity, *hesed* describes the passion that drives God to care about humanity's welfare and about our future. Repeatedly in the Hebrew scriptures, *hesed* is used to describe the actions of God as God saves Israel from its enemies and troubles; preserves life from death; and intensifies a person's spiritual life. In a word, God cares about us, and God's care extends into every moment of each day. This is *hesed*.

I suggest to you this morning that what we see in the actions of Jesus in the gospel reading from Mark, provide another view of God's *hesed*, God's loyalty, God's unwavering commitment to care about us and for us, no matter what, and no matter who, and no matter where we are on the journey.

Today we find Jesus himself on a journey. Literally, it is a journey from one side of the Galilean Sea to the other, a journey Jesus took many times. In various stories, we read that these crossings were sometimes stormy. Just as important, we understand that on one side of the sea there was familiar home turf, Jewish territory; the other side of the sea was Gentile, a place less hospitable, less comfortable, and less safe. If you were a first-century Jewish Christian, an early hearer of this gospel, you would have immediately understood the meaning of Jesus crossing from the other side and returning home. You would have felt the tension and its release as you listened to

the story. You would have seen the storms and the risks of crossing as both literal and metaphoric—as descriptive of the challenges in your life as the church, taking the risk of opening yourself and reaching out to that “other,” the Gentiles. It wasn’t an easy crossing for those in the first century, just as it isn’t for us, today, when we reach across the boundaries that separate us from our own version of “the other.”

Yet we have a model in Jesus, who crossed again and again to the other side...No matter who they were or where they were on life’s journey, Jesus was not afraid or tentative about getting his hands dirty with the lives of others...

This we see with certainty in today’s story-within-a-story. The narrative begins and ends with the leader of the synagogue—an important, public figure who, because of his influence, could make his way easily through the crowd of people surrounding Jesus. Still today, prestige holds power, and our crowds part as quickly to let these important personages through to the front. He pushes his way to Jesus because his daughter—12 years old—is terminally ill, and he seeks the help of this healer and teacher, even to the point of prostrating himself before Jesus and in the presence of those crowding around. Characteristically, the synagogue leader—Jairus by name—who is accustomed to issuing orders, does not ask Jesus to come over and heal his daughter...he commands it. He implores Jesus, “Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be healed...” Interestingly, Jesus does not chide Jairus for his hubris, but looks into a father’s hurting heart and hears only the man’s faith that healing would somehow happen through Jesus.

Let us follow a rabbit trail here that may be forming as a question in your own mind...it is the question of healing. Does God heal? If so, why some and not others? Are our prayers for healing answered? If so, how? If not, why not? If our prayers do not receive God’s attention, why pray for healing at all? These questions and others like them plague us; they nip at our heels for attention. No doubt, this passage—this healing story within another healing story—begs us to demand solid answers to these questions. Volumes have been written about healing. One of the commentary authors I read in preparation for today’s meditation wrote simply, “In a sermon on this text, it may be helpful to challenge the congregation toward a more nuanced understanding of what asking for

healing is and what healing may mean.” A more nuanced understanding of healing is needed...to be sure! Let us remember that prayers for healing are not simply utilitarian. “That is to say,” writes Michael Lindvall, Minister of a Presbyterian church in New York City, “prayer is not simply a matter of bending the vector of divine will toward your will, your needs, and your hopes. More profoundly, to ask something of God is to edge into deeper relationship with God. God’s mind may or may not be changed but you—your mind and heart—may be.” A seminary professor of mine spoke similarly, using the metaphor of a cash-register. He said when we pray for healing, we often think of God as a kind of cosmic cash register in the sky. We put money in the drawer and expect a return on that investment whenever we ask. We put in time and effort, and expect that when, like Jairus in our story today, we say jump, God will respond with, “How high?”

Yet in today’s story, it is in relationship, not in the healing itself, that Jesus focuses his attention, calling us, I believe, to do the same. While still on his way to the home of Jairus and his family, presumably having conversation with the synagogue leader, the crowd expands and, as scripture notes, “presses in on Jesus.” Suddenly Jesus experiences a loss of power, a weakening perhaps that is noticeable, and he demands to know who touched him. Now imagine the scene. The crowd is nearly mob-sized, with the energy of people jostling for position closer to the healer and teacher, in the centuries before any kind of protective space between celebrity and crowd was known. When asked by Jesus about who touched him, the disciples could easily have remarked with some degree of sarcasm, “Excuse me, Jesus, but who hasn’t been touching you?!” Aside from this obvious irony, Jesus is persistent to know the person, to develop a relationship with that one. Note that the healing of the woman who had bled for a dozen years is over and done. She is healed, without fanfare or even direct request on anyone’s part. It is the relationship that interests Jesus more than the healing itself.

As the story continues, the woman identifies herself to Jesus—unfortunately history has neglected her name—and instead of reprimand by Jesus, she receives a blessing from him. Jesus brings her into the family, calling her “daughter” and applauds her faith and sends her away in peace. You see, hidden in this particular story is not only the reality of illness, but also the reality of isolation

and social alienation. In Jesus' world, a woman with a condition like this woman's probably would have been a social outcast. Her condition made her ritually unclean, and she would have had to live her days in isolation, separated from her family and away from her village. When people saw her coming toward them, they would have distanced themselves for fear that she might brush against them, for her touch would have made them, especially the men, ritually unclean, too. Hidden in this tale is a flash of precious intimacy between two human beings who are socially very distant from each other. Their scandalous touch does not yield the anger and alienation we might expect. Rather, it brings wholeness, healing, and peace. Perhaps, when we ask why our prayers for healing are not answered, we'd be better asking, why are we afraid to touch others or to be touched by them... Perhaps instead of blaming our self-inflicted sense of failure—"if only I had more faith, then I would be healed..."—it would be more in keeping with the scriptures to open ourselves to the healing and loving energy that is all around us in the people we encounter.

For in both of the healing stories this morning, it is the outcast, the disempowered, the unexpected recipient of God's grace, who is touched, and in that touch of the Divine, finds healing. A 12 year old girl from the upper crust of society and a woman who for 12 long years—as long as the little girl had lived—has carried the burden of a persistent and ultimately bank-breaking hemorrhage. As an aside, when we encounter the number 12 in scripture, it is often a coded language meaning the whole or sum total of something. The number 12 encourages us to see what is made whole and by whom it receives its wholeness. Here, that is relatively obvious. Both females, described alternately by the number 12, are now whole, because of the relationship, the touch, of and with the Divine. Yet, imagine again the crowd of people, and even the early congregations of Christianity struggling to know how to move forward. They, too, would have been recipients of the Divine touch, as they came face to face with the reality that Jesus was not afraid to touch those society labeled as "other..." and that the concern Jesus had for the humanity of the little girl and for the unnamed woman is a concern—a *hesed*, if you will—that the followers of Jesus were expected to embody.

Certainly these stories are about healing, and they are about much more than healing. In their setting—first-century Palestine under the oppressive thumb of the Roman Empire—these two

healed females are poster children for the Kingdom of Jesus, which in contrast to the Empire, welcomes the lost, and the least, and the lonely. Beyond empire, it is in the actions of Jesus we see our own marching orders clarified. For whether or not we can actually cure anyone of anything, we can and we must, like Jesus, get our hands a little dirty with the lives of those we seek to help.

I heard recently that we here at Redlands UCC are known around town as the “Anti-Walmart Church.” A week or so after I heard that, I, along with several other clergy in town, spoke briefly at the noon Kiwanis meeting. Mentioning that moniker, I quipped to the group, “We are not Anti-Walmart, nor are we anti- much of anything...we are for a lot of things: human rights, immigration reform, equality in marriage, and justice in the workplace...” I share this purported reputation with you, because I think it tells us we are doing something right by being known in our community, as was Jesus in his, as people who care about justice and who love others unconditionally. But I ask you today, while we as a congregation may very well be involved in a variety of healing situations, are you personally participating in the healing of the world? Are you embodying the *hesed* of God in your relationships, your actions, your decisions? Is there more healing to which God and Spirit and Christ are calling you this day? When we review the needs, we will feel like Jesus claustrophobically surrounded by the crowd, for the healing needs of our community and our world are great. Yet, like Jesus, we are invited to see in the crowd, one person at a time, one brother or sister in faith at a time, one fellow daughter or son of God at a time. And seeing, we are called like Jesus, to get our hands a little bloody with their pain and their hurt and their anxiety and their fear. And with dirty, bloody hands, we are called, like Jesus, to touch and through that touch, to offer healing love. It's really not too much to ask. We have the power already—God's power in us—a power that is immanently loving and always forgiving and joyfully creative and deeply, deeply relational. So, just as the old telephone commercial used to advise, “reach out and touch...” today's gospel lesson would add to it, “let the touch of Christ heal through you...”

~ Amen and Blessed Be ~