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The Reason for Our Hope: A Season of Stewardship, Part II

“Who’s Got A’Hold of Me?”

Mark 5:21, 25-34 21When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea.... 25Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. 26She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. 27She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, 28for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” 29Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. 30Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” 31And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” 32He looked all around to see who had done it. 33But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. 34He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

It’s a poignant story, isn’t it? Imagine with me in your mind’s eye the scene.

Jesus has been teaching, going about the countryside. The crowds have been building. In fact, just before the story in today’s scripture Jesus and the disciples had been forced to get into a boat to cross the Sea of Galilee in order to find a few hours of solitude. And now again, he is surrounded by a crowd. In fact, he’s mobbed. Folks crush around him, some wanting to hear what he has to say, some wanting to ask him questions, some – just as in our own day – who seem to follow the latest religious and spiritual fad, some who were probably just bored and thought this an interesting way to spend some time. And I can see in my mind’s eye this nameless woman, slowly and patiently weaving her way through that crowd, trying to get closer and closer, trying, though, not to call any attention to herself whatsoever, being as invisible as she knew how to be. But why? Why her *stealthy* approach from behind, as Mark tells the story?

Well we have to understand the context here. And while the story tells of her

condition delicately and even euphemistically, we know immediately something of the kind of problem she must have had when the scripture says she had been “*suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years.*” But what we must understand is that this was not just a frustrating and embarrassing condition; no, it was one that literally made her an utter social outcast according the conventions of the day. She would have been considered “unclean” in the same way that lepers were – which meant that she was not to ever touch other people. She would have been forbidden from staying in other people’s homes, forbidden, even, from attending the synagogue. For twelve long years she has lived as an outcast. Anything that she might have touched could not be touched by anyone else. If she happened to *accidentally* touch another person, it would immediately render that person unclean as well. She would have been forced by her condition to live apart from every other human being – her husband, her children, her grandchildren, her best friends, and every other human being in her life. It is not too exaggerated to say that her existence was a kind of living death.

So that is why she is sneaking from the back through that crowd to get to Jesus, hoping that no one who knows her will see her since they’re all looking the other direction. And this is where our story then takes its unexpected turn and this is where Jesus poses question to her that He will also end up posing to you and to me on this and every day. Let’s hear the story again as Mark tells it:

...she had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” ... the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him.... He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made

you well; go in peace, and be healed....

Wait a minute. Jesus' question here hardly seems monumental or earth-shaking; no, it seems pretty pedestrian: "*Who touched my clothes?*" In fact, on the face of it, to our scientifically formed ears this whole story just seems both very odd and very unfair. We are troubled by how someone who was so clearly sick through no fault of her own is treated, by what seems a very unjust and unnecessary isolation. And we may be troubled by this almost superstitious-seeming belief that by touching Jesus' clothes will somehow have magical medicinal power. So what do we do with this? What do we do with Jesus' question? And most importantly, what do we learn here about your lives and our God?

Although a standard translation of this question is "*Who touched my clothes,*" I think there is actually a much more powerful, if colloquial, phrase that does much more justice to the real significance of Jesus' question; that phrase is this: "**Who's got ahold of me?**" Do you know that phrase? It was common where I grew up: "*Son, why are actin' that way? What's got a'hold of you?*" A simple Google search discloses that there are dozens of songs with that phrase: love's got ahold of me, you've got ahold of me. One of the most powerful songs of the incredible '60s singer Janis Joplin, whose life was over much too soon, was called "Ball and Chain," and it has this phrase: "*Something came along, grabbed ahold of me, and it felt like a ball and chain.*"

Sometimes life feels just like that, doesn't it? Something grabs hold and just drags us down, dispirits us, brings us low, keeps us up at night, makes us feel unworthy, can make us feel like a fraud, makes us want to hole up and hide away. Am I right? And surely that experience of that hemorrhage for twelve years for that woman must have been like having been grabbed ahold of by a ball and chain, a weight that was just too much. But that's the reason Jesus asked the question: **Who grabbed**

ahold of me? Because I think the point is this: **Life** may sometimes grab hold of us and bring us low, but God never, ever wants **us** to grab hold of a mistaken understanding of who God is, of who Christ is, that **adds** to our dispiritedness, that reinforces feelings of isolation or despair or unworthiness. And yet it is so very, very possible to grab ahold of the wrong understanding of Jesus, of God, and have it make our lives worse. We have sadly seen this on the world stage too many times. We have seen Hutsi and Tutsi, Sunni and Shiite, Christian and Muslim, liberal and conservative, grab ahold of an understanding of God that presumes that God blesses the demonizing and the disrespecting and, at worst, even the killing of “the other.” We have seen too many people ignore President Lincoln’s wise words who, when asked during the Civil War if God was on the side of the North, said “It is more important to know that we are on God's side”¹ than that God is on our side. I’ve quoted writer Anne Lamott before but what she says on this topic bears repeating: “*You can safely assume you have created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates the same people you do.*”² Because here is the thing: whenever we do that, then I can just hear Jesus asking, in an incredulous and even angry tone: “**Who’s got ahold of me?!?**”

What about you? Is there some weight that you carry around, some ball and chain that you drag along? Is there something in your life that is dead? Is there some secret shame that causes you in those wee hours of the night to be driven to despair? Do you trudge around with a ball and chain that says you can’t measure up to what God expects *because you’ve gotten ahold of the wrong image, the wrong understanding of God* and you secretly think that God is keeping a cosmic score of your life and that score always gets ever more lopsided against you?

Every one of us is that woman in today’s story. We all are flawed and hurting in

¹<http://www.leaderu.com/offices/stoll/news4-96.html>

²http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/7113.Anne_Lamott

some way. We all have secret shames and wounds that don't seem to heal. And all of us need to come to God, come to Christ, and take hold of that power. But when we do so, Jesus is going to ask **us** *"Who's got ahold of me?"* and *"What kind of understanding of Me have you got hold of!?"* The woman came to Jesus simply wanting to be healed, wanting to be brought back from the deadness of life that her condition had imposed on her. She came to Jesus, with the assumption that Jesus was not a tyrant, not a scorekeeper, not someone who would send her away still hurting and still dead. She came assuming that the one whom you and I know embodies the power of unconditional love would also love her, no matter what her condition, no matter what her hurt and isolation, no matter that everything around her told her she was "unclean." She came knowing the truth of what writer Robert Capon once said:

Jesus came to raise the dead. The only qualification for the gift of the Gospel is to be dead. You do not have to be smart. You do not have to be good. You do not have to be wise. You do not have to be wonderful. You do not have to be anything...you just have to be dead. That's it.³

Indeed, the woman got ahold of a good and gracious and life-giving understanding of Jesus, and she was healed, she was made whole, she was able to come back from the dead, lay aside that ball and that chain.

It can be the same for you and for me, you know. If we get ahold of the right Jesus, we too can be healed from what isolates and shames us, we too can have that which is dead in us resurrected, we too can discover that we don't have to drag that weight around with us. Now, it likely won't happen instantly as it did in this story. It might, but it is also possible that it will take time, it will take baby steps, it will take one day, sometimes one hour, at a time as our feet tentatively try out a new path without

³Quoted in <http://day1.org/1327-a-daughters-faith>

that weight that has so borne us down, as the parts of us that we thought forever dead come back to life. But it is possible, and it is what Christ wants for you and for me. He wants us to get ahold of him and know hope and healing and wholeness, to know new life.

What's got a'hold of you. It's a very good question as well for a Thanksgiving Sunday. I am reminded of what the great African-American preacher Gardner Taylor said: "I have never known anyone who was truly and profoundly grateful who could also at the same time be mean-spirited, or small, or vicious, or petty, or self-righteous." In other words, if gratitude has got a'hold of you, how can you not want to show that thankfulness? In the letter each of you received this week from me, I told you the story of the atheist whose child survived a brush with death and who said "I want to say thank you, but I don't know who to say thank you to." Gratitude got a'hold of him and he had nothing to do with it.

But, my friends, we do have something to do with it, don't we? We do have a way to express our gratitude for the fact that what has got a'hold of us is a God of grace who won't let us go, a God who assures us that our lives live on, as the hymn has it, in endless song both now and always, a God who takes no joy when we stumble or when life abrades and up-ends us, a God who wants nothing but our good always, a God who has promised to work even in the bad things in our lives to seek to bring good. I don't know about you, but in the face of such a God who has grabbed hold of me, I too want to say thank you, I too want to offer my best in response to God's best, I too want to give of my time, my talent, and my money so that I can help God be even more successful in grabbing a'hold of people who are hurting, who need a word of gentleness not judgment, who think that religion is about joylessness instead of jubilee.

You too have that opportunity to show what's grabbed hold of you. You too have

that opportunity to show that gratitude has grabbed you because of the way God has held you and holds you still. Your money is not the only way to express that, and there are so, so many of you who give in so many other ways, testifying to that generosity of spirit that Gardner talks about for those whom God has grabbed hold of. But our money is also what will allow us, as this part of Christ's body, to do more for His sake, to be a better witness for his love, to show indeed, that what has got a'hold of us can make all the difference to a hurting world. This week you have been given the opportunity to think about how you will express your gratitude, and a commitment card was in that letter and is in your bulletin. I hope that you have had a time to reflect and pray about how to respond. I hope that you will increase your financial support to the church, if it is possible for you, as Barbara and I will

And now I invite you to come forward and bring those commitments to our ministry in 2011, bring those pledges of support, knowing that what we are really doing is testifying to Who's got a'hold of us! If you would prefer, one of the deacons on the side aisles can take your pledge form and bring it forward as well. Let us come with joy!