

Anna Burnham:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good Morning.

Anna Burnham:

And welcome to morning prayers at Memorial Church. Today's service will begin with a responsive reading from the black Appleton Psalter book, Psalm 67, found on page 34. Please stand as you are able and willing to read responsively by the whole verse. May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us.

Congregation:

Let thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving power among all nations.

Anna Burnham:

Let the peoples praise thee, oh God. Let all the peoples praise thee.

Congregation:

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for thouest judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth.

Anna Burnham:

Let all the peoples praise thee, oh God. Let all the peoples praise thee.

Congregation:

The earth has yielded its increase. God, our God, has blessed us.

Anna Burnham:

God has blessed us. Let all the ends of the earth fear him.

(singing).

This is a reading from the assigned readings for today from the Catholic lectionary, and it's from the Gospel of Mark, chapter five.

Now, there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for 12 years. She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all that she had, and she was no better but rather grew worse. 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 around in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciple said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you. How can you say, 'Who touched me?'" He looked all around to see who had done it, but the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace and be healed of your disease."

So last semester, beloved member of this community and morning prayers regular Abby, who is very annoyingly studying abroad in Spain at the minute, so I can't even embarrass her by pointing her out in person, directly requested a thematic focus for one of our weekly Bible studies for students, which also by the way, starts tonight. You should totally come. Could we explore the gospel healing narratives through the lens of disability theology? That is, how can religious stories of miraculous healing sometimes cause further harm to disabled people today? How do these stories add to the prevalent cultural narrative that a disability is always something to be quote, "fixed," instead of a different way of being in the world that should be met and held with full radical accessibility? How can, perhaps a little confusingly at first, stories of Jesus' healing lead to the further marginalization of people with disabilities in our own society if those stories are interpreted in a specific way?

It was a bit of luck that the gospel story in the lectionary today when I was assigned morning prayers is one we had discussed recently in Bible study, so I hope you will excuse the slight cheat on my end. This hemorrhaging woman in the story has a chronic medical condition, what today we might understand as a type of disability. Hemorrhage is kind of a weird, vague, violent term. And what the text might be too squeamish to say, but what it certainly alludes to based on the original Greek, is that this woman likely suffers from what today doctors call, I'm going to mispronounce this, menorrhagia, which is abnormally heavy and prolonged menstruation that makes normal daily activity impossible.

What else do we know about this woman? The text tells us that she has, quote, "endured much" under doctors and that she has spent all her money leaving her both still suffering and completely destitute. We know that statistically, women's pain, especially that of women of color I'll add, is underdiagnosed and not taken seriously, often with fatal results. And I can't imagine the situation was much better in 30 AD Palestine. We know that in this woman's society, this abnormal menstruation would've meant that she was ritually impure consistently for 12 years, making her a complete social pariah, literally untouchable because no one could touch her without themselves being made unclean as a result and having to go through a purification ritual afterward. She has been let down by the healthcare system, marginalized by her community, and she hears about this guy named Jesus who has been running around Galilee healing people. And with one last burst of hope, and let's not forget, fierce, fierce agency and bravery, she pushes through the crowd and touches his cloak and she is healed.

Author, speaker and disability theologian Stephanie Tait has discussed this story specifically, and she wonders how it can be liberating for folks with disabilities beyond the idea that a quote, unquote "fixing" of their disability might occur through strong faith. Tait points first to that very agency, that act of the woman boldly touching Jesus' cloak. She is vitally asking to be healed. She is deciding to be healed, demanding even. That agency is maybe key to this story because Tait also asks us to reimagine what Jesus is doing in these healing narratives. Most of the time, the person who is receiving healing has been marginalized by society because of their disability. What if we imagine that the healing being offered by Jesus is not because a body needs to be fixed, but so that the person can be fully incorporated back into the arms of society where they belong and where they never should have left? What if that is the end goal? And what if healing is the only tangible tool Jesus has to accomplish it in that moment?

Amy Kenny, another disability theologian, sees the restoration happening here not as one of the body necessarily, but a larger one of quote, "restoring people into a sense of communal wellness." It is crucial that the woman claims this healing for herself and that Jesus lets it happen. The text tells us that he was immediately aware that, quote, "power had gone forth from him." This is the only instance in the healing narratives where we hear about this sort of direct energetic transfer of power between Jesus and the person. It's special. It's noticeable. I think it's really powerful in and of itself.

And Jesus doesn't say like, "Oh, sorry, I see that you're claiming for yourself what society won't give you, but I actually really need this power for myself, so good luck, lady." He releases that power and affirms the woman's action verbally. Jesus gets the attention here, but I think the nameless woman is the main character, and Jesus is just acting as an ally should. In claiming her healing from Jesus, the woman is really reclaiming, after all those 12 long years, the means necessary to restore her place in her society.

What we are seeing from Jesus and the woman really is a radical means of creating access so that people can live full lives in society, and it requires crucially, a slippage and a sharing of power. If you are here today and you, like myself, are not marginalized because of the way our bodies work in the world, I wonder if this story and stories like it might encourage those of us here to wonder where we are called to solidarity, to radical, urgent accessibility and equity. How can we create a society where people can belong and thrive in the bodies and spirits they already inhabit?

Let us pray. God of radical change, God of equity, Jesus and this woman sought a society of care and inclusion. Help us do the same, to see and act and share our power. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Anna Burnham:

Please stand as you are able and willing, and together let us recite the prayer that Jesus taught us, saying:

All:

Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Anna Burnham:

Together, let us sing the hymn I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord, number 271 found in your crimson Harvard Hymnal.

(singing)

Go forth in peace, and may the love of God draw us closer to God and to each other today and every day. Together, let us say, amen.

Congregation:

Amen.