



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOSTE, YEAR B, JUNE 27, 2021  
2 SAMUEL 1:1,17-27; PSALM 130; 2 CORINTHIANS 6<sup>1-13</sup>; MARK 5:21-43

## THE CONTAGION OF SIN (OR THE DANGER OF PURITY)

**Mark 5:21-43** [*When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." So he went with him.*

*And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve 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 about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples 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."*

*While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.]*

It's really wonderful to be with you, regathered in the flesh.

When the Dean and I initially discussed me preaching this morning, I warned him (we were on a zoom call) that the next time he saw me in church receiving Communion, my hair would look a lot like **his**. And if you knew me before I

cut it, it was down to about here. [N.B. Arienne's+ hair is about half an inch long. She indicates with hand gestures that her hair used to be about 1.5 feet long.] So that was a little more surprising of a declaration a few weeks ago.

You see, in college I was a new Christian convert and I wanted to learn about religion. And I was a

little scared to have the full critical treatment of my precious new faith in Jesus Christ. So, I took a LOT of Islamic Studies classes to learn how to think about religion more generally: its texts, its practices, and its ideas.

One of the most influential courses I would ever take... that I have ever taken was called, "Ritual and Law in Islam." In that course I read a lot of formational texts in a field ritual theory – texts like Purity and Danger (by Mary Douglas) or The Myth of Eternal Return (by Mircea Eliade).

In that course, when we spoke of the pillar of Islamic ritual, known as the hajj (حَجَّ), we talked about the pilgrim's return to an original state of being (Myth of Eternal Return). Hajji are not to cut their hair or fingernails during the journey to Mecca. They eat simple food and depend on Allah and the other faithful alone. Symbolically, the Hajji becomes a way to connect to the origin of one's faith. The beginning of humanity before we fabricated elaborate clothing and built monuments to our own greatness. The intentional and costly process of pilgrimage provides the believer with a glimpse of what it might be like to depend on God instead of civilization's social constructions.

And as I reflected on what my own journey through the months of pandemic was like, the image of pilgrimage returned to me over and over again. If Zoom was the new way people saw me, I did not need to spend as much money on haircuts... and it was a little dangerous to try so I let my hair grow longer and longer. My clothes became simpler and more comfortable – like a lot of folks I switched to more sweats. I stopped expecting people in church buildings to be my only praying community. And I built one in my home with my spouse and children.

And when I was fully vaccinated, I knew that all of those things would need to change. But like any human, I had been transformed by my new habits and practices and I would need to change again to rejoin the world; but I would also need to carry those lessons with me on the road ahead. And there seemed to me no better way for this pilgrim to mark that transformation than to cut off all her hair.

I think the sort of transformation I've experienced lately is what Jesus came to the world to bring all people. In this morning's Gospel lesson, we encounter great acts of power that rewrite cultural scripts about Purity and (the) Danger of impurity.

The story we heard this morning begins with Jesus coming ashore. Now Jesus had been making his way through the towns of his region, traversing the water by boat. The crowd had already gathered when the leader of the local synagogue came forward. Jairus pleaded with Jesus to heal his daughter who was on the verge of death.

Jesus responded to his plea, making his way into town. At this point, the Word was out. People were pressing in seeking Jesus' healing for all manner of ailments.

And one of those was a woman who we hear had been hemorrhaging 12 years. We never learn her name, only that she was zavah (za-VAH, זָבָה). It's important to pause here for a moment and understand what that phrase "hemorrhaging for 12 years" means.

The purity laws of Jesus' people dictated that women who bled from their uterus, who were called niddah (ni-DAH, נִדָּה) during those periods, were ritually impure. When bleeding, women could not participate in religious

gatherings. Because this impurity was considered contagious and dangerous, rabbis and scholars developed an intricate system of social and ritual norms to prevent the contagion from spreading.

Women who were niddah, could not engage in sexual intercourse and could not touch other people, especially men, who needed to perform rituals on behalf of the family and community to please the LORD. These rules governing social contact with others by niddah were called harkhahot.

Women who violated harkhahot by engaging in sexual intercourse were liable for any contamination or impurity that resulted. So too were men who knowingly engaged in sexual contact with niddah. Men and women could even be liable for some kinds of interpersonal touch or embrace, like a hug.

Now even more dangerous to the society than niddah, were zavah. If a woman's bleeding never stopped, she was always an insidious threat. If she touched the wrong person, she could transmit impurity and the whole community could become infected.

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So, I imagine then that the people who saw that woman touch the cloak of Jesus knew that had violated harkhahot.

I think it's difficult for us to grasp what that must have looked like to the people in the crowd and the disciples. The moment she touched him, he should have been tainted. I think people would have turned their heads to look the way we turn our heads in a grocery store today when we see or hear someone coughing. Primed to fear the contagion of COVID-19, we become afraid when we see signs of contagion around us. People with allergies feel socially obligated to say that out

loud to strangers to resolve the social tension created by the danger of COVID.

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According to the Law as his contemporaries understood it, Jesus should have been made ritually impure by the woman reaching out to touch his cloak. But instead of being tainted by her impurity, Jesus transformed the contagion into healing and gave it right back to her. He lent her energy, the Spirit which healed her. He felt it going out of him Jesus had transformed her supposed impurity into whole new life that could include other people again.

Then Jesus turned his attention fully to Jairus' daughter. Jesus went to her in the family home and told the family and disciples that she was not dead. She was sleeping. After Jesus bid her rise, we learn she too had been healed. And then the author of this particular story about Jesus gives us an important clue to how we should understand these twin miracles: the unnamed girl, Jairus' daughter, is 12 years old.

Now to me this next bit makes sense and it may not to you... I have heard credible arguments... at least that I think are credible... that the sleeping girl may be the hemorrhaging woman's daughter. Perhaps the unnamed woman suffered some trauma during her delivery. Once bleeding, she was cut off from the social space the wife of a religious leader should have occupied. If you spend a moment in the world of that premise: Imagine the grief and loss of a faithful wife of a rabbi, who loved the ritual of worshipping God with other people, but was not able to participate it because of contagion.

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Even if you aren't persuaded by that speculation, it does appear that the fate of the girl and the

woman are inexorably linked. The woman's 12 years of marginalization are tied to the life and illness of the girl. Her healing happens in tandem with the restoration of the hemorrhaging woman.

While we modern educated folk may look down on people who view menstruation as fearful or impure, these last days have shown just how terrified smart humans can be of unseen contagion and how very easy it is to marginalize people who we see as impure and dangers.

Despite all the scientific evidence assuring me it's relatively safe for my 8 year old kid to go to school and church with other kids, I am scared. When he first went back to class in the winter, it took all we had in us to drop him off and watch him go through a gate while we stood in a sea of unmasked congregating parents flaunting the instructions. But I also believed that I, and my kid, had a responsibility to those people, our neighbors. We could not sit in a castle untouched by poverty or disease while other kids struggled in class to learn and took all the risk without our help.

And these days of pandemic have also demonstrated the deep connection between our own health and the health of others, especially those on the margins. Access to vaccines in poor communities or even in other nations will impact us. If we try to cast out impurity, our sin will return to visit us. In a concrete sense, we can't let disease circulate freely in, say India, without expecting to see a new and improved strain in the months to come in our community.

When we try to hold back frightening or impure things from the place, they always visit us

anyway. Jairus kept ritual impurity at bay by casting a woman out. But in doing so he also lost touch with the living God, the light that was the life his precious daughter.

In this story, and today, Jesus is the agent of our transformation. Instead of being contaminated by impure touch he transforms the energy from the hemorrhaging woman into health. Instead of believing that death was inevitable for the girl, he shared with her, and her community, the good news that she doesn't have to die... none of us do.

But the only way to claim that unending life, is being willing to risk giving it up for the sake of others.

it means going back into dangerous spaces where interaction with others may pose a risk, it means thinking carefully about how to be with one another, and it means caring as just as much for the health and salvation of others, as we do for ourselves.

As each of you reemerge from your pilgrimage with COVID, remember that

No sense of purity justifies the casting out or destruction of human beings.

No health or true life comes at the expense of the poor and those on the margins.

Carry with you these lessons and do the work of restoring the world to wholeness and connection. Because when we Christians take on the ministry and mantle of Jesus, we become a part of his work: transforming the contagion of sin into new life and hope.