

Suggestion for World AIDS Day Sermon 2009

Luke 8: 40-56: Jesus heals the bleeding woman

Glossary:

Ruler of the synagogue: Influential lay person who leads meetings in the synagogue, looks after the building and supervises the teaching

Bleeding woman: unclean according to Jewish laws; was not to be touched and was avoided even by family; excluded from any religious gathering and not allowed in places of worship. Even touching her bed or anything she sat on, makes another person unclean for the rest of the day (Lev. 15)

A 1. (40-42): Jesus is asked to heal the daughter of a ruler of the synagogue

B 1 (43-44): Sick woman ignores all laws and rules and goes beyond the ordinary to touch Jesus

B 2 (45-46): Jesus leaves the planned schedule and insists on exposing the woman

B 3a (47): The woman's testimony

B 3b (48): Jesus' affirmation of the woman's faith and restoration of status and belonging to the religious community

A 2 (49-56): Jesus accomplishes Jairus' plea according to His schedule, being too late according to human understanding

Core statement:

Through Jesus' impact all become equal members of the Kingdom of God – non-regarding their status before human eyes.

No uncleanness is too big to be overcome by Jesus.

“Jesus being rude – embarrassing the healed woman”

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--- Reading of Scripture Luke 8: 40-56 ---

The part of scripture we want to focus on today, is not so much the story of Jesus raising the little girl from death. Embedded in that story there is a little episode about the healing of the bleeding woman. I want to focus on it because we will discover that it was very meaningful to Jesus. And he wanted people to know about it and to understand the meaning of what he had done here.

To understand this episode we need some background information. The text tells us that this woman was suffering from a constant bleeding and that she had tried everything to get cured, but no one was able to help her. But why was it so serious? Why was she suffering so much? Her burden was not so much the symptoms of her sickness. The really bad part about her condition was, that it made her an outcast in the Jewish community. A woman who was bleeding was considered unclean. Untouchable. The Jewish law says that if you only touch anything that she sat on or that she lay on, you must wash and you yourself become unclean for the rest of the day. Unclean means, people avoid contact with that person. She is not admitted to the church or synagogue. She is excluded from any spiritual activity, any prayer or worship service. And she is ignored and avoided even by the own family because everyone is afraid of getting unclean being in contact with her.

Now that we know this, we can imagine how desperate she was. How lonely. How depressed. How low her self-esteem. And when she hears about Jesus being around, she puts her trust in Him. She knows that he can save her, cure her. She just believes it. But there are crowds of people around him, and Jesus is busy. And she does not even dream of a chance to talk to him in private, to tell him about her embarrassing condition. But her faith in Jesus is so unlimited that she thinks: “If I just touch Him, I can be healed.” So she breaks every rule – she uses her elbows, touching people all around her, making them all unclean according to Jewish law. She takes that chance of her lifetime to get through to Jesus, to touch Him. She could not have behaved more inappropriately: not only a woman touching a man in public; an unclean woman touching a Jewish teacher, making Him unclean! A major offense!

But she does it, and the miracle happens: The moment she reaches out and touches just the end of his garment, she feels how the bleeding stops immediately! Imagine her feelings – her overwhelming joy: She will be able to live a normal life again! It has worked! It has finally worked! She is cured! She can join her family again, her friends will meet with her again, she can go to the synagogue and pray again! The woman is so happy and she just wants to get home quickly and unnoticed and dive in her new life. The story could end here: And she lived happily ever after...

But then the horrible thing happens. Jesus turns around and asks who has touched him. She blushes... What can she do now? How could she identify herself – people will hate her when they hear what has happened, how she had touched many of them, and then finally Jesus himself. What will he do? How will he punish her? She is paralyzed with fear and shock. Peter gets impatient and tells Jesus that everyone is pushing and pulling, anyone could have touched him because people are so close together. But Jesus is not impressed. He does not give up: "I know that power has gone out of me." And he does not let go until this poor, embarrassed woman comes out of the crowd. Until she comes in front of all people and tells everyone the whole embarrassing story.

When I tried to put myself in this woman's shoes it felt like someone stabbed me in the heart. How could my loving and kind Jesus do this? Why didn't he just let her go? Why did he expose her to that situation? Jesus lets the woman pay a high price. But he does not do it to offend and to humiliate her. He does it because there is something that he wants everyone around to understand. There are things that we need to understand if we want to follow Jesus. There are lessons to be learnt from that woman. Lessons that are so crucial that Jesus even pays the price of her exposure to the public. And these are the lessons I want to focus on:

1a) Your faith has healed you" – Making the former outcast a role model

Jesus lets everyone listen to the woman's story. He wants the crowd and the disciples to hear the story of her faith and her healing. And he wants everyone to hear and think about his unexpected response. No judgement. No blaming for breaking the law. No lecture on unlawful behaviour. "Your faith has healed you. Go in peace!" That is all, nothing else. But that is quite something! The crowd's attention

now is on the woman's faith! And women did not have any saying in the Jewish community of those times. They were considered as valuable as cattle. And Jesus turns these social and religious standards upside down: In front of everyone, in front of the ruler of the synagogue, in front of spiritually educated people, this woman, the former outcast, is publicly praised for her faith. What was her faith like? What is it that we need to learn from her?

This woman was not worried about her reputation. This woman was so firm in believing that Jesus is her only hope. Nothing could keep her from getting in touch with him. She did a crazy thing – who would believe that touching someone can heal you? That is not normal behaviour! But she does not bother about her dignity, about her pride. She is ready to step out of the ordinary, even out of the church rules. She is ready to give it all up for Jesus. Are we ready to give up our prestige, our reputation, our pride for Jesus? Are you?

How many of God's blessings do we miss because we take ourselves too serious? How many experiences of life in abundance? How many times can we learn from this woman who was ready to do something that was considered wrong and shameful by her fellow believers just to get closer to Jesus? What are you ready to trade in to receive more from Jesus?

And even further: Who are the people you consider unclean? Those you do not want to be in touch with? Maybe you are in touch with people but you still look down on them, you look at who they are and at their life and you consider them unclean. Then here comes the lesson for you: Maybe it is time for you to wonder what you can learn from that person! Maybe through all his or her weaknesses that person can teach you something – just like this woman teaches everyone around you. And there are more lessons for the crowd around Jesus:

1b) "Daughter" – You are one of us!

Jesus does not take advantage of the woman's complete trust in Him. She is being healed instantly. And while she probably expected that now he was going to punish her or at least to expose her to the people's humiliation, he actually does the

contrary: He restores her dignity. He gives her a new position in the community. Not only does he make her faith a role-model for others. Jesus also welcomes her in his kingdom by one little word: “Daughter”. That means: You are one of us! The English text says “you are healed”, but that word in the Greek text does not only refer to her physical healing. It also means “You are saved”. Your relationship with God is restored - you are a full member of my family. In my kingdom, there is no unclean or clean, no man-made hierarchies. There are just daughters and sons – and you are one of them. Welcome to the family – your past does not matter here. I am not interested in your education, nor in your bank account, I am not interested in your HIV status, in your race, sex, religious group, sexual orientation.

Real worth and dignity is not man-made. It is Jesus-made.

The more we cling to our reputation with our ridiculous means, the more we want to keep up our image and pride, the more we drift away from Jesus. The more we spoil the chance of receiving real ever-lasting dignity and worth in Him. And he wants everyone to understand and learn this lesson. That is why he stops and exposes the healed woman. Our hierarchies, our standards don't count in his kingdom, his grace is unlimited and available for everyone who just believes in him – and in him we are all equal.

Are you a member of Jesus' family? If not, today is another chance to become his son or daughter. And it is so easy – you just need to do what the bleeding woman did: Acknowledge that you need Jesus. That you cannot live without him. That you will never be good enough to meet his standards. That you need his forgiveness. That he is the only one who can save you. Just reach out to Jesus and let him know that you need him. Don't invest in a fake life, where money, power, education determine the worth of people. Not if there is real life in Jesus, life in abundance, without the burdens of the past, life in honesty without lies. Let him give you real worth and dignity as a son of God, a daughter of God. You will only find it in him.

And for those of us who are already sons and daughters: Do we consider ourselves higher than others around us? Do we think our faith is better than someone else's? Then we are completely on the wrong track. Who are the ones we consider unclean? The ones we look at with disgust? Who do we avoid contact with? Jesus reveals our

mistakes: Our measures are human – but in Him we are all equal, sons and daughters – let's never forget that.

And the last important lesson that we learn from the woman is:

1c) Talking openly about our weaknesses, we make way for God to be glorified

Only because of the woman's testimony, the miracle of her healing was revealed to the crowd. The only way to let us know what God has done was for her to come up with the embarrassing details and to let us know about her condition and how touching Jesus healed her immediately. Only because of her testimony, eye witnesses kept telling her story to others and even wrote it down so that we can read and study it today.

God tells the Apostle Paul (2 Cor 12: 9-10). "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness". So the Apostle concludes: "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me"

Why then do we so often hide our weaknesses and pretend perfection? The HIV and AIDS Desk of the Baptist Convention has got this vision that our churches become places where we are all aware of our weaknesses, where no one is condemned because we know we all fall short of the glory of God. We dream of our churches as places where people can live openly HIV positive, because they are accepted and embraced by congregations who know that we all need God's grace. Of congregations who know that God's power is made perfect in our weaknesses. Do we give God's power the chance to be made perfect in us? Do we open up in front of our brothers and sisters and talk about our struggles? Are our services and ministries places where imperfect people feel safe and invited to open up? Where I can disclose and share the burden with others when I find out that I am HIV positive? Are my fellow church members the first one to know and to support me when I am pregnant and the father of the baby has left me the day he found out? Thinking and talking about our own weaknesses is the best remedy against judgemental attitudes. It keeps us humble. And it makes way for God's power to be made perfect in our lives.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus, who was indeed perfect, attracted people in trouble like a magnet, while we as church congregations are the first to judge them and make them run away and hide? Instead of looking at our own weaknesses, we hide them and pretend to be perfect. Instead of being proper ambassadors for Christ who show love and mercy, we are self-righteous and judgemental! Do we have a glimpse of how this return to honesty, to authenticity would impact us personally and our congregations? How God will work in us when we give Him space to dwell and work in us by not pretending perfection anymore and by admitting our weaknesses?

Remember, when we read the scripture we found out that this story is like a little episode, embedded in another story. Jesus was actually on his way to heal a dying girl. The daughter of a man, who played a leading role in the religious upper class, who was something like a church chairperson with a lot of influence. But then Jesus seems to lose track - he stops and takes time to reveal the miracle around the healed bleeding woman. And as I said at the beginning, I do not focus on the story of that little girl today. But as my last point I want to draw your attention to the very end of that story, to verse 56:

2. Jesus' priority: The marginalized woman

Jesus asks the parents not to tell anyone what he did. Isn't that surprising? He does such a big miracle, raising someone from death, and then he does not want anyone to know about it. And even more interesting: On the other hand He does want as many people as possible to know about the healing of the bleeding woman. His priority is not to prove his calling in the religious circles. He is not interested in boasting with his miracles in front of the religious leadership. Jesus' priority is for everyone to learn the lessons from the healing of the bleeding woman. That is why I want to summarize them again to conclude my sermon:

1. "Your faith has healed you": In His Kingdom values are upside down: The unclean woman, the outcast's faith is set as a role model for all the others who consider themselves better. Following Jesus is about giving up your prestige, your reputation, about humbling yourself, about not holding back anything. And only by

faith can you become a son or a daughter of Christ – not by wealth, nor by power, nor by a good life-style.

2. “Daughter”: His ministry and His kingdom are for everyone. All are equal and His grace is sufficient for everyone. Our human hierarchies of good and bad, clean and unclean – they do not count any more.

3. God’s power can reveal best in our lives when we openly talk about and show our weaknesses. We miss the chance of experiencing God’s power in our lives when we pretend to be perfect. And we do not attract others to follow Christ because they feel the lie. But keeping our failures and weaknesses in mind also keeps us from judging others and makes us more loving and forgiving.

The people that Jesus puts on the stage, are the ones that we don’t look at in our daily lives, the ones that we exclude and stigmatize. We must learn from those who still know that they are sinners and that they depend on Jesus’ grace. We must learn from those who trust God like children. We must stop putting certain people on pedestals as if they were better than others.

If we humble ourselves and boast with our imperfection, with our failures, we will gain real ever-lasting dignity and worth in Jesus. And we will become a bit more of that dream church, where everyone is welcome, non-regarding their HIV status, their education or the car that they drive. We will be a family of believers where university lecturers listen and learn from children, where pastors mature in their faith when they listen to an alcoholic’s testimony. And then we will attract people just like Jesus attracted them, because they will feel that there is something different among believers, that there is true and unconditional love, that there is worth and dignity for everyone. Let’s fight for that – let’s make it our priority, just as Jesus did - and let’s start today! AMEN