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**A: Pentecost 2
Matthew 9:20-22**

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Salem, Bridgeport**

“When All Else Fails, Touch Jesus”

I have a God-sighting to share with you....

First of all, I am not one of those pastors who plans their sermons way in advance. Generally, I look at the text for the next Sunday on Monday night or Tuesday morning. I'm not like Pastor Rip Hoffman who always plans weeks and months ahead!

But, about three or four weeks ago, I was out walking
and I was thinking about today and about our meeting
and I thought, “I wonder what text I'll be preaching on that morning?”

And so I looked it up.

And when I read this gospel, I said,

“Oh, my God! What a perfect text! Thank you, God, for such a wonderful gift!”

The gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all tell us the story of this woman who had “an issue of blood”, a woman who was bleeding, hemorrhaging, a woman, who perhaps had fibroid tumors. She had been bleeding day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. And that bleeding had physical consequences. It left her anemic, weak, and tired, but it was more than that. That would be hard enough for a woman in this day and age.

But back then, it was so much worse, as women didn't have disposable sanitary products,
and even water for washing bodies and clothing was in short supply.

The condition left her feeling unclean all of the time, but it was more than that.

Because, according to Jewish law, if a woman was bleeding, she was unclean,
not just physically, but spiritually.

Anything that she touched, she would make unclean, not physically but spiritually,
and anyone who touched anything that she had touched would consequently be made unclean.

Now that may sound to us like craziness, right?

But do you remember back at the beginning of the pandemic,

when we didn't know how the disease was transmitted and we thought maybe it was through touch?

I remember my older son explaining to me how important it was when I shopped for food,
that I use one hand to put food in my cart and the other hand to get out my credit card.

When we all got groceries home from the store or had them delivered,

we let them sit in our garage or on the back porch for 24 hours,
just to make sure they were not contaminated, just to make sure they were not “unclean”.

And even when we began to understand that the disease was airborne, think about how we avoided people.

Not only did we wear masks, but we had to stay 6 feet apart.

If someone was coming down the sidewalk, I had to move off into the street to pass them.

That's how it was for that woman.

We were told to isolate ourselves from anybody not in our immediate circle. And that's how it was for her.

Grandparents and grandchildren were forbidden to hug each other and that's how it was for her, too.

Think of all the losses & suffering we endured during those first few years of the pandemic,

& now imagine what it would have been like to continue to experience that isolation & fear for 12 years.

But in addition to the health effects of losing blood,

the messiness of being physically unclean,

and the stigma and isolation of being ritually, spiritually unclean,

the other thing was that in Jewish theology,

life was carried in the blood, and in some sense we, too, see the truth in that,

and so, this woman who was bleeding was leaking out life.

There was a constant drain that robbed her of her physical health & her emotional health & her spiritual health.

But the reason I was so excited about having this text on this particular day
was because as soon as I read it, it came to me that this woman is a symbol of our Church –
and not just Salem, and not just our synod or the ELCA, and not just our inter-communion partners,
but most White mainline congregations.

We have been bleeding members and dollars, not just for years, but for decades.

And just like the woman in the story,

we haven't been able to understand why it was happening and we haven't been able to stop it.

Just like in the beginning of the pandemic

we didn't understand what was happening or why & we didn't know how to stop it.

We were losing people and dollars;

we were being drained of energy and vitality and hope and faith;

our very life was leaking out of us.

Back in the woman's time, the Talmud listed 14 possible cures for this bleeding issue.

This woman had no doubt tried every cure, and she had expended all of her resources,

and so even if she were to find another cure, she wouldn't be able to afford it.

As Church we know what it's like to try to find the right fix.

Congregations have spent not just years but decades, trying to renew worship.

Maybe if we just sang the right music or had the right worship format,

or worshipped at the right time, that would fix it.

Maybe if we just had the right Sunday school curriculum or the right confirmation program,

or we did enough things with our youth, that would fix the problem.

Maybe if we just were smarter about evangelism & inviting & welcoming & integrating

people into the life of the congregation, that would do it.

Maybe if we just had some impactful social service projects that helped the community, that would do it.

Maybe if we hit on the right stewardship campaign, that would do it.

But no matter what we tried, just like the woman, it didn't stop the bleeding.

Why? Because every fix we tried was a technical fix, a practical fix, a human fix.

And technical, practical, human fixes don't fix spiritual problems.

All of those things that we tried over the past 10, 20, 30, 40 years?

They've been no more helpful than rearranging the furniture on the deck of a sinking ship.

That poor woman must have been nearly out of hope.

She had tried everything and nothing had worked,

and now there were no more new treatments out there, and even if there were, she couldn't afford them.

Who could blame her for losing hope after 12 long and lonely years?

But when she heard that that healer named Jesus was coming to town,

she found she had at least a thin thread of hope left.

And that thin thread of hope gave her enough courage to take a risk

and do something that she wasn't supposed to do, something that others wouldn't understand or approve.

She would go out into the world, out into the crowd where she was not supposed to be.

She would do whatever it took to act on this one last hope.

There were so many people around Jesus, that there was no way she could get to him without touching people.

She would have to push through them and elbow her way in, just to get close to him.

And then when there were only a few people between her and Jesus,

she realized she couldn't let anybody see her touch him,

because that would make him unclean and then he couldn't touch others to heal them.

So she thought she would just touch his cloak,

maybe just the hem of the cloak, maybe just the tassels on the hem of his cloak.

So she dropped to the ground, and crawling forward, she reached between the legs in the crowd,

and touched the hem of his garment.

And she knew instantly that she was healed.

We know what happened to her because of what Jesus said.

He said, "Who touched me?"

And his disciples said, "Are you crazy? It's wall-to-wall people! Everyone's touching you!"

And he said, "No! I'm talking about the touch that caused power to flow out of me!"

Well, if he felt the power flowing out of him, then she felt it flowing into her!

I'm sure there was a part of her that wanted to run away and not admit what she had done.

But she couldn't.

Not when she was standing tall and proud and smiling and full of health and vitality and joy!

There was no way she could keep that joy inside, no matter what it would cost her!

And so she said, "It was I. I am the one who touched you!"

Before Jesus and the entire crowd, she confessed to her sin of touching him

because there was no way she could keep such life-transforming grace to herself.

She had no choice but to witness to the miracle Jesus had worked in her.

I am here to tell you that the answer to the hemorrhaging that the Church is facing
will never be found in human wisdom or common sense or a technical fix or a strategic plan.

Yes, there may be technical fixes to employ, practical adjustments to make,
or strategic plans to implement down the line, but that's not where it starts.

Because if it starts with a human fix, it will fail
just like every other thing we have tried has failed.

What our gospel today tells us is that we need to reach out in faith and touch Jesus.

For when in faith we touch Jesus, power will flow out of him and into us,
and we will find our bodies and minds and hearts and souls are made whole,
and there will be no more thought of illness or death
because by touching Jesus in faith our lives will be transformed,

So why did God let that woman bleed for 12 years?

Because God knew that in 12 years that woman would touch Jesus and would be made well. It doesn't
matter how long Salem or the New England Synod or the ELCA

or our inter-communion partners or White mainline Protestants, have been bleeding.

It doesn't matter how many things we've tried that have failed to staunch that bleeding.

There is nothing that you or I or our congregation or our synod or our denomination can do
in our own human wisdom to stop the bleeding.

But we can reach out and touch Jesus.

Like the woman, we need to let go of all the things we've tried to do in the past.

And we need to stop looking for the next magic cure

that our human wisdom, knowledge, and common sense tell us will work.

Because what the Bible teaches is that it's faith not in ourselves, but in Jesus,

that will not only stop the bleeding, but will heal us and make us whole.

When we touch Jesus, his power will flow into us, and just as the woman experienced,

our lives will be transformed and we will find ourselves filled with life, and life abundant.

Instead of reaching out for the next human fix, I encourage you to reach out to Jesus,
with faith in him, and in him alone.

And I pray that our congregation will do the same, not reaching out for the next human fix,
but that we will reach out together to touch Jesus,

putting our faith not in anything we can do on our own,

but solely in the power of the one who came

that Salem & our synod & our denomination & the whole Christian Church on earth
might have LIFE and have it abundantly. Amen!