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SPARTANBURG

## THE TRUE MIRACLE

Mark 5:21-43

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On this Mother's Day, as we give thanks to God for the gift of our mother, we need to remember the challenges millions of women face, especially mothers, not only throughout history but in today's world and in our town. As we dive in to eradicate child poverty, the clear pressing issue is the continued, uphill climb many young mothers face. We will never fix child poverty unless we first address the ways in which our society stacks the cards against young single mothers.

Granted it was worse, much worse, in ancient times. "To be a woman was no good thing in those days," wrote South African priest and poet, Joseph Donders. He could not have been more right. In ancient times, being a woman meant you were born into a world designed to make your life impossible.

Women were considered unclean for seven days every month. The mother had to bring a sacrifice in order to be "purified" from her uncleanness. They were not allowed to enter a place of worship for thirty-three days after the birth of a son and sixty-six days after the birth of a daughter. Let that one sink in.

Here is brief list of some other challenges:

- It was frowned upon to give women anything more than a rudimentary education.
- At the death of her husband, she got a "maintenance" while the sons got the inheritance.
- A woman's legal testimony was not valid in court.
- A woman could be obtained by forced intercourse, which originally was a type of twisted protection because no one else would marry a woman who had been raped.

The woman in our passage had it even worse. Compound the pervasive inequities with what was

perhaps endometriosis, causing a twelve-year flow of blood, she was permanently untouchable. She could not ever go to worship and, according to Levitical code, she should not even appear in a public place. But it was even worse, as Mark explains. She suffered under the care of quack physicians who not only took all her money but made her condition worse in the process. According to Ched Myers in *Binding the Strong Man*, "squandering money on ineffective health care was a perpetual problem for the poor of antiquity."

Of course, this woman's plight doesn't sound too much unlike those of many women in today's world. In India, girls as young as twelve are sold as temple prostitutes because their families cannot or will not support them. They are forced to sell their bodies for pennies with no means for a better life. In some countries, certain villages circumcise women to strip them of physical pleasure. In other countries, some parents abort their child when they discover it's a girl, but it's not just a problem across the ocean.

- In this country the poverty rate of older women is twice that of men.
- The standard of living for divorced women and their children plummets while divorced men's standards goes up.
- And right here in Spartanburg, the wage gap for Black and Hispanic women shows that they are paid less than 57 cents for every dollar paid to their white male counterparts.

Despite the strides made in recent decades, there is a long way to go. And the woman in our passage seems to have nowhere to go. But news spread fast – even without twitter. A miracle worker had come to town... but could she really expect help?

Apparently, he was making haste to go and save the child of a prominent male. She is of no account. We don't even know her name. She has no one with her. No one seems to be concerned for her. While the twelve-year-old girl has her father and what seems to be a whole entourage of people. The little girl has had twelve years of privilege. The woman twelve years of misery and shame, yet they find themselves in need of the same miracle worker. Whatever side of the tracks into which we were born, all of us need that same miracle worker. Evidently, the woman believed in his power, but she did not seem to know him. She could not be sure if he wasn't like the others who dismissed her, reviled her, ignored her.

And, so, she did not approach him openly. She did not call out to him for help. She couldn't call out to him. Not really. The honor codes of the time prevented her from initiating a conversation. Being on the bottom of the social ladder, unlike Jairus who was not only a man but a "leader of the synagogue". But she is so desperate and so miserable, she seizes an opportunity. She reaches out – discreetly – hoping, praying nobody would notice.

And she is healed.

Healed of this nightmare. But, unlike others healed by Jesus, she does not walk and leap and praise God. After suffering for so long she cannot even rejoice. Instead, she tries to shrink back into the crowd.

Jesus calls to her. Mark tells us she came in fear and trembling and fell down before his feet awaiting her fate.

Her fear was born of her society's treatment of women. Religious, sociological, and political factors made it harder.

Religious factors for the most part have been consistently prejudicial. A few decades ago, Southern Baptists voted to stop ordaining women. As former Episcopalian Bishop Spong said, the "Bible has been used as a weapon of oppression". Throughout history, the church has culled from the

Bible every conceivable passage to justify the continued subordination of women. The Victorians blamed all women for the Fall. The fundamentalists use Paul's passages to force women to be quiet in church. Yet, these same groups who cite scripture to undergird their views, ignore other passages such as Genesis 1:28 which states both man and woman are created in God's image and, in chapter two, Eve is described as Adam's partner not his subordinate wife.

The language we use has real consequences, not only on our views of women, but how we view God.

During one confirmation class in Idaho, I asked the confirmands how many of them thought that God was male. A few raised their hands and I could see everyone was thinking about the possibility. I then asked how many of them thought God was female and they broke out laughing. Somehow, society had led them to believe that God might be male, but the very thought of God being female was well comical. God of course is neither male nor female but Spirit.

Young mothers face hard choices in our town. For many, the cost of transportation and child care makes finding viable employment impossible. Child care and transportation cost more than the money they can earn!

So, as this nameless woman approaches this miracle worker, what could she reasonably expect? What possible reason could he have for insisting to know who touched him, except to humiliate her for making him unclean?

So, she gets down on her knees hoping for mercy. She came in "fear and trembling." Fear and trembling. The best thing in the last 12 years of her life just happened. But, instead of feeling free she is in... fear...and trembling from what she believes will happen next. How terribly she must have been treated for so long to be in such a state.

This is the plight of so many mothers and children in this town. They must go begging from place to place, from church to church, from non-profit to non-profit, from government agency to

government agency, relying on the largess of strangers to keep them and their children alive, all the while hoping to hold onto a measure of dignity and self-worth. For that woman to be in fear and trembling means that all her self-worth and her money had been spent a long time ago.

Science fiction writer Ursula K. LeGuin described who she thinks would be the best candidate to send aboard a visiting spacecraft, whose crew wished to learn about humanity and the planet Earth. LeGuin wrote,

I would ... go down to the local Woolworth's, or the local village marketplace, and pick an old woman, over sixty, from behind the costume jewelry counter... She has worked hard at small, unimportant jobs all her life, jobs like cooking, cleaning, bringing up kids, selling little objects of adornment or pleasure to other people. She was a virgin once, a long time ago, and then a sexually potent fertile female, and then went through menopause. She has given birth several times and faced death several times - the same times. She is facing the final birth/death a little more nearly and clearly every day now. Sometimes her feet hurt something terrible. She never was educated to anything like her capacity, and that is a shameful waste and a crime against humanity... She has a stock of sense, wit, patience, and experiential shrewdness.

How many women just like that live in our town.

That woman, so long ago, approached Jesus and was reduced to begging for mercy, fearing yet another public shaming. Even though she had found physical healing there was obviously still greater social, cultural, and most importantly spiritual wounds that were even more debilitating than the disease she suffered from.

What could she expect from this miracle worker?... but a greater miracle than the first. Instead of a rebuke, instead of shame, instead of judgement, he offered her respect, he offered her grace, he offered her love when he said, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

Jesus loved everyone, but especially those kicked to the curb by society and that meant many women. This woman has become the daughter whose need took precedence over the daughter of the prominent man. By recognizing her faith, Jesus elevates her over his own disciples, whom he accused of being faithless in chapter four.

By accepting this woman, Jesus not only cares for a lonely woman, he disabuses the crowd of their purity laws. He makes a statement that my law supersedes your law, that the law of compassion and love is stronger than the law of propriety.

Jesus does not choose the weak in exclusion to the strong. After this interchange with the woman, he goes with Jairus to heal his dead daughter, but not before exhorting him to be more like the woman healed of the hemorrhage, "Do not fear, only believe."

Let us all go forward, let us fear not to bring God's kingdom of equality and compassion for all, and especially for all those mothers that struggle for dignity each and every day. Amen.