

*Power is as Power Does*

**Text:**

Mark 5:21-43

**A sermon preached by**

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## 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. 22Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet 23and 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 [Jairus]. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. 25Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. 26She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. 27She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, 28for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” 29Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.30Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” 31And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” 32He looked all around to see who had done it.33But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. 34He 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?”36But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe.” 37He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. 38When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. 39When he had entered, he said to them, “Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.” 40And 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. 41He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" 42And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. 43He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.



I'm supposing most of you, if not all of you, have experienced the ocean and its relentless waves. From the glassy smoothness just out beyond where the lifeguard's whistle blows you back to safety, they come crashing to the shore where most of us sit in awe of the display that God's creation is producing in front of our eyes. The wave peaks to a crest that breaks into white curves and swirls until finally it crashes to the floor and draws back into itself retreating to whence it came. It continues wave after wave – glossy smooth, humped up to its peak, white rage, crash to the floor, swirl back to the tide.

Have you ever just laid there, or sat, with your eyes closed – or eyes open for that matter – and heard the crash and thunder and echo of those waves? With a power that not only sounds ominous but also feels as if it will take you with it, the waves seem to sweep back out to the immensity of God's great creation anything and everything that has gotten in its path, only to return again and again and again. Smooth glass, crescendo to its apex, crash to its bottom, repeat.

That was my experience just two weeks ago as I sat with my feet in the cold, salty water of the Atlantic in Ocean City, MD. I was thinking about this text and power and its implications. And there it was right in front of me. I rode some of those waves into the beach – sometimes belly-surfing, sometimes on a dragon-decorated boogie board.

Power. The power of the ocean that we think we can contain, until our houses get washed aside by hurricanes or entire communities and their inhabitants get wiped away by tsunamis. The power of the ocean that we can at times harness to create electricity.

Is that the “power” that Mark’s Gospel is so determined to tell us about? Is the power of the ocean what reshapes us, that reshapes the communities in which we live? It can reshape the geography of a community for sure – it can wash away the sand from our beaches, it can bring a sense of foreboding or fear or awe to our ears and our eyes. It is power that can make some of us move our physical well-being to another location. But when God is asking us to reshape our communities to be more just and merciful and open, is it the power of the wind and sea that will do it? Is that the power that can reshape the community that lives and breathes around us in the lives of our brothers and sisters?

Last week we heard that only when we call on the power of God can we be reshaped. “Who is this that even the winds and sea obey him?” The power of reshaping community comes from the one who makes the ocean waves calm. It comes from the one who says, “Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me.”

That is more power than a crashing wave onto an Atlantic beach. And it is more power than what moves our ears and eyes and our feet. It is God’s power, not the power of God’s creation, but God’s power that can reshape us and our living, breathing communities.

Emerson Powery (perfect name, right?), Professor of Biblical Studies at Messiah College near Gettysburg, PA suggests:

This was a bold woman, who approached [Jesus] (albeit, secretly) without a male sponsor. But, in light of her condition as one whose “impurity” (cf.

Leviticus 15:25-30) could have cut her off from the religious community and from financial stability, she may not have had a choice but to act daringly. [She had "suffered a lot" under the care of the medical practitioners (5:26). Attention from the professionals was usually reserved for elite persons. The "suffering" remains ambiguous but may relate to length of time, severity of pain, or social scorn under the "care" of the specialists (5:26)]

She is a woman who has money to spend on physicians and all the known cures for her condition, yet she has to nudge her way through the crowd. And she faces Jesus' male disciples who would brush her aside, just as they would brush aside the children that were coming to Jesus.

Yet she persevered. She wanted to touch the healer. She knew what God's power was and she knew that she was deserving. She didn't need permission. She had only herself to rely on to make this happen.

Dr. Powery in his discussion goes on to say, "Other women, throughout history, have had to act in this manner to retain their human dignity. Phyllis Wheatley published her poems ... Jarena Lee, the first ordained female minister, pursued her God-given call to preach. Mother Parks wouldn't give up her seat."

But Phyllis Wheatley, he writes, the first published African-American woman and first published African-American [poet](#) "published her poems, under the scrutiny of Thomas Jefferson, Immanuel Kant, and numerous other (white) intellectuals of the day," and she had to defend the authorship of her poetry in court in 1772, examined by a group of Boston luminaries, including John Erving, Reverend Charles Chauncey, John Hancock, Thomas Hutchinson, the governor of Massachusetts, and his lieutenant governor Andrew Oliver.

So also Jarena Lee, the first woman authorized to preach by the founder of the AME Church, Richard Allen in 1819, had to receive approval of the men around her as well. She became the first African American woman to have an autobiography published in the United States. Yet despite Allen's blessing, and the support of church leadership, men no doubt, she continued to face hostility to her ministry because she was black and a woman. She became a traveling minister, traveling thousands of miles on foot. In one year alone, she "travelled two thousand three hundred and twenty-five miles, and preached one hundred and seventy-eight sermons."

“And Mother [Rosa] Parks wouldn't give up her seat,” writes Powery. But, again, as histories of The Movement tell us, she needed the approval stamp of Dr. King and the SCLC to make it happen. The first test case, that of Claudette Colvin, was rejected by Montgomery's African-American leadership (men?) because she was a teenager and had become pregnant while unmarried and they were worried about using her to represent their movement. Mother Parks was acceptable, they decided, and her case became history.

The unnamed woman in Luke's Gospel? It doesn't seem like she cared much what the men were saying about her – the priests, the physicians, the religious leadership, the disciples – she pushed forward, literally and figuratively – and made it happen.

A woman out by herself in a crowd like this places herself in a position to be permanently ostracized by her own family. It's a dangerous, potentially life-threatening action on her part and the audacity of it is highlighted further by the listener hearing that her plan all along was to push her way through the crowd to actually *touch* Jesus' clothing. It is bad enough that she would be in the crowd at all but that she would also go with the intention of touching a man's clothing is completely outrageous.

She doesn't throw herself at Jesus' feet like Jairus does just a few verses before this. No, the woman is bold and determined enough to have set a plan and followed it to its fulfilment. She hasn't asked permission of the men around her – they would have told her to stay in her place – or seek permission of the men around Jesus – they would have shooed her away. (Ewarts)

Crispin Fletcher-Louis (2003) argues that what this text is offering us is a glimpse of Jesus communicates purity in the way that an unclean person would contaminate – through direct physical contact, through touch – and that the image being shown here is that of the High Priest. Those with knowledge of scripture would have heard this in the Jesus story. There are biblical precedents for such an outflow of holiness, including some where garments communicate holiness.

Ezekiel 44:19. “And when [the High Priest] go out into the outer court to the people, they shall put off the garments in which they have been ministering, and lay them in the holy chambers; and they shall put on other garments, lest they communicate holiness to the people with their garments.” (RSV)

Leviticus 21:10-12: "The priest who is chief among his brethren, upon whose head the anointing oil is poured, and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose, nor rend his clothes; he shall not go in to any dead body, nor defile himself, even for his father or for his mother; neither shall he go out of the sanctuary, nor profane the sanctuary of his God; for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is upon him: I am the LORD.”

The priests are anointed with oil and consecrated to wear the priestly vestments, garments which presume that they can communicate holiness like a contagion, if worn by a consecrated priest. In the *Wisdom of Solomon*, Aaron rushes out of the sanctuary to stop a plague of death on Israel that God has sent.

The text makes clear that the power lies on the word written on Aaron's robes.

The touching, of his garments even, conveys power from one to another. And it's only in that communicated power that the resumption of wellness, of reconnection with community, can now begin. It hasn't happened yet. The touch doesn't bring immediate wellness – it stops the hemorrhage and brings healing, but true *wellness* comes with the later exchange between she and Jesus. “Your *faith* has made you well.”

When she touches Jesus' garment,” writes Professor of Preaching and Homiletics at Perkins School of Theology, Alyce MacKenzie, “she is healed (*iaomai*), but not made well (*sozo*). *Sozo* signifies a more holistic, spiritual wholeness, not just physical cure. Her symptoms disappear, but it is not until she returns and has an in-depth conversation with Jesus that he pronounces that she is made well. ... ‘Wellness’ or ‘being saved’ comes only in the personal encounter with Jesus that involves words, communication, and promise.”

You and I may not be capable of curing people's physical symptoms and illness but we are each of us called to seek Jesus' touch and to be Jesus' touch in our community. If anything can reshape community, it's that touch conveyed by we as Jesus followers.

MacKenzie continues: “We are called to stay in touch with Jesus so that we can be agents of salvation (understood as liberation and wellness, not as physical cure or escape from the fires of hell) in his name. When we stay in touch with Jesus, our words, our touch, and our presence have more life-giving power than we realize. We have the power to wake someone from sleep and begin to make his or her dreams of healing and new life a reality.”

Jesus initially played no active role in her healing. His clothes did or bottom line is that God did the healing. Yet just “as the woman

understood the changes in her body, so Jesus recognized a change in his body. [The drying up of her blood flow (i.e., her "discharge") was due to the "discharge" of Jesus' "power" (*dunamis* in 5:30). But no one else -- including the disciples -- recognized what had leaked out/ transpired. Not even Jesus was fully aware of what had happened.”

Jesus was unwilling to allow the outflow of his "power" to occur without acknowledgement. The "stealing" of a healing miracle was inappropriate. It was one thing for him to touch others but another matter altogether for persons to touch him.

“‘Fear,’ not boldness,” concludes Dr. Powery, “provoked the woman to come forward this time. Yet, she presented herself to him to reveal the ‘whole truth’ She did not have to return. She could have escaped with her healing intact. But she apparently understood his intense look and may have recognized the potential for public shame if she were caught by this male healer. The cultural weight of her situation demanded her return.

How many members of that crowd must have felt skittish after hearing the "truth" that she had come into contact with so many of them *before* the healing!

Power is all around us. Sometimes good power, sometimes bad power. Power created by the world around us is often what keeps us from the truth, keeps us oppressed and repressed, keeps us from being able to touch God and to be brought back to wholeness.

Bree Newsome, yesterday, confronted the destructive power of hate directly with the power of God’s healing. While her partner, James Tyson, a white man, prayed the Lord’s Prayer down below, Ms. Newsome, an African American woman, confronted directly the power of hate. This gifted classical pianist with awards and recordings among her list of accomplishments, scaled to the height of power outside the South Carolina Statehouse and

accomplished what many have been calling for for these past few weeks. She took down the Confederate Battle Flag.

Bree didn't ask permission of the men around her. She didn't wait for the powers that claim power to make a decision. She took it upon herself to climb to this highest point and to seek God's touch and to bring God's healing.

As the Capitol police ordered her down, she continued to climb and she grabbed the symbol of hate and pulled it loose. As she climbed back down to the chanting "We have nothing to lose but our chains," she was heard saying: "I come to get you in the name of God. This flag comes down today!"

Confronting the power of hate with the healing power of God. Isn't that our work as followers of the Healing Jesus? It is.

And it is what makes us whole again.

Amen.