

Reflection 11 June 2023 Matthew 9:20-26,

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The bleeding woman in this story could be from anywhere in this world, they are everywhere and in many of the different contexts bleeding women are often isolated and separated from village life, society in general and banned from being part of the everyday life and community. One of my female students from Kiribati said that when women are menstruating they are separated into a separate hut for the days she is bleeding.

Women do not fare well in the Bible. The Bible itself has been used as a tool to define and even subjugate women over the years. When we set out with intention to study the lives and roles of women in the Bible from our contexts, we are faced with the stark truth of women's lives then and now.

Carol Newsome and Sharon Ringe write: "Because of its religious and cultural authority, the Bible has been one of the most important means by which women's place in society has been defined. Throughout the centuries, of course, the Bible has been invoked to justify women's subordination to men. But it has also played a role, sometimes in surprising ways, in empowering women."<sup>1</sup>

Overall, women are not treated well or framed in the best light. Powerful women fare even worse. They are evil as seen in the presence of Potiphar's wife and Queen Athaliah (2 Kings 8:26). They are portrayed as prostitutes, adulteresses and tricksters manipulating men to get the outcomes they want

with no accountabilities held for the men in these stories. (Karen Georgia a Thompson).

The woman in this story according to Eusebius tells us that at Caesarea Philippi there lived the woman whom Christ healed of a hemorrhage (Matthew 9:20). In the apocryphal Acts of Pilate (4th/5th century), this woman is identified with the name Veronica.

The story goes that while Jesus was walking through a crowd a woman with an ongoing condition, a flow of blood reached out to touch Jesus' robe. She has endured the chronic condition for 12 years, today you could probably call it Endometriosis, Veronica suffered greatly under the care of many doctors, and spent all she had. Instead of getting better, her condition has worsened. Veronica managed to touch the hem of Jesus robe and was restored to herself. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza says through this woman we glimpse the impoverishment of the permanently ill. And she didn't just suffer an incurable illness, but she was also permanently unclean and impure. Whomever she touched would also be made unclean. Imagine 12 years of untouched isolation.

Jesus was on his way to the house of Jairus, a ruler in the local synagogue, to see about healing his ailing, or according to Matthew, already dead, 12-year-old daughter. They never do mention her name. Jesus makes his way to her through a crowd of people. It slows him down. And now an unnamed woman reaches beyond the illness that marks and makes her unclean, impure, untouchable and not-to-be-touching-others, to touch the hem of his garment. Which will make him unclean. It doesn't stop her. But it does stop

him in his tracks. He feels her touch and even more, her reach. He felt the gift of her gutsy faith and told her it was faith that made her whole.

She is portrayed as a mature woman and middle-aged given she has been suffering for 12 years, and it may be that although able chronologically to have children, she is now infertile. The text makes no mention of any attendant, neither a maid who accompanies her, nor a relative. She appears to be alone in the world. Although ill, she is mobile. Quite likely a resident of Capernaum, she becomes part of the crowd in a somewhat disguised state, in other words her clothing (because of her condition) may be layered, and she may attempt to cover her face so as not to be seen or recognised. Although Mark's description recounts specific details about the woman and her unsuccessful search amongst doctors for a cure, it remains silent about something every other woman who hears or reads the story realises: the woman's life is a constant routine of washing and drying pieces of cloth to catch and staunch the flow of her blood. Furthermore, her condition may emit an odour. As such, it is potentially very embarrassing. Significantly, Mark's audience immediately knows the ramifications of 'an issue of blood for twelve years' (Mk 5:25): her condition excludes her from worship and community life.

This woman has *heard* stories of Jesus (Mk 5:27)! Prior to this incident, Mark records that Jesus had commanded an evil spirit to leave a man (Mk 1:21-28), healed Simon's mother-in-law by taking her hand (Mk 1:30), reached out his hand and touched a leper (Mk 1:40-45), told a paralytic his sins are forgiven and commanded him to take up his mat (Mk 2:1-12), and ordered the legion of spirits in the man who lived amongst the tombs in the region of Gerasenes to leave him (Mk 5:1-20). Reading Mark's gospel in the order presented, it is reasonable to assume that the woman has heard these or other stories that

present Jesus favourably. Based on this, she convinces herself that if she touches Jesus' clothes, she will be healed.

Veronica mixes inconspicuously with the crowd, awaiting Jesus' return and deliberately orchestrates an encounter with him. Although she thinks it will be a quick, unnoticed, one-way meeting, she soon learns that Jesus engages those who encounter him, especially one who draws power from him. The woman uses the crowd's noise and jostle as cover. Thus camouflaged, she becomes a crafty risk-taker. Fellow crowd members come with mixed motives: some to see a sideshow of miracles, to hear a teaching from a parable, to see a testy, feisty encounter with the Pharisees, or to enjoy a diversion from waiting around unemployed (cf. Loader 2007:1-2). In contrast, the woman plans to get close enough to touch Jesus' garment. Displaying determination and focus, this woman sets a courageous course.

However, the woman displays selfishness by ignoring the fact that, legally, her touch makes anyone - including Jesus and those in the crowd bumping into her - unclean. Weighing the shame of being recognised by angry people, aware of the possibility of a public reprimand, knowing that people pick up stones to drive the unclean away and heedless of the harm and inconvenience she may cause crowd members and Jesus, she nonetheless approaches Jesus. In modern terminology, she stalks him in broad daylight. She decides her need trumps others' rights.

The result? Jesus commends her for her faith (Mk 5:34)! When the characteristics she exhibits - desperation, hope, selfishness, pushiness, courage, persistence, and self-interest - are directed at Jesus, they constitute faith. Jesus both defines her action and attitude as faith and acknowledges her

faith as directed at him. Discovered, the woman separates herself from the crowd, comes forward, falls at Jesus' feet, and confesses (v. 33). With words tumbling forth, she tells him 'the whole truth' (Mk 5:33b). She gives Jesus and all listening details about her condition and details about her efforts to become well again. The woman, as one who has just experienced the power of God to heal, evidently lets feelings, fears and joys, bubble out in no particular order. Her halting confession is like the expression of amazement and joy

Jesus, a keen listener, makes confession easy. Evidently, the woman did not simply give a generalised version of the truth or attempt to shield herself from public shame. In response to what must have been a specific and potentially humiliating rendition, she receives honour and restoration without censure. Jesus frees her from any pattern of self-condemnation.

Mathew writes that the cultically impure, like the leper in Mark 1:40-45 and arguably like the ill woman and dead girl in this article, are made pure, because Jesus spreads purity with his presence 'and turns impurity into purity'. When Jesus encounters impurity, he amazingly reverses it. Unexpectedly, the touch of another, or Jesus' actions of touching a leper or a dead girl, not only do not make Jesus unclean, but also make the leprous clean and the dead girl alive asserts that Mark's presentation of Jesus shows Jesus' 'disapproval of the purity system, which became detrimental to the interests of the poor and marginalised'. The woman in this story certainly experienced exclusion.

Jesus' dismissal of her indicates that she can now enjoy the peace coming from a relationship with him. His kind benediction ('Go in peace') confirms 'that her healing is not merely a temporary remission', Jesus calls her to live her faith.

An encounter with Jesus changes a person. Mark provides ample evidence of this. The woman's initial condition of extreme need is not the concluding word on her life. Instead of dying, she lives. Instead of the ebbing away of her mana, her life force, she receives new energy and new life. Her hopelessness and desperation drive her to plan a sneaky, one-sided encounter with Jesus. Jesus knows when power leaves him. Jesus searches for her - the one in the crowd who pulled power from him.

She comes forward and confesses. Instead of rendering a reprimand, Jesus acknowledges her action, for it took courage and expressed what he succinctly calls faith. Jesus is the focus of her faith, and of her determination, courage, desperation, need and self-interest. His healing of her affliction restores her to the covenant community. By calling her *Daughter*, he rewards her with public praise. He assures her of ongoing healing and of a prominent position in his new family; his gracious dismissal acknowledges her wholeness. In the finest sense, the unnamed woman in the crowd is a biblical heroine. Significantly, she - now whole, clean, set in a new family, and a recognised follower of Jesus – Amen.