

What Would It Take to be Humble?
Lenten Worship Series, 2019 “What Would It Take to.....?”
Week One
Mark 5: 24b-34
March 10, 2019
Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

This week I will need to defend Socrates in two of the classes I teach. I will need to defend the ancient philosopher not against the charges of impiety and corrupting the youth that Melatus and others in ancient Athens charged him with; in spite of the outcome, he did quite well defending himself. No, this week I will need to defend Socrates against the charges my *students* will inevitably bring against him, charges of sarcasm and arrogance.... because my students don't know what humility looks like. They can't name anyone who is humble. They have trouble defining the word. They--we, live in a society and culture that does not value or promote humility; in fact, it is strange and distasteful to us. They (we) equate humility with weakness, with poor self-image, with being a push over. So, when they hear Socrates say that wisdom is attributed to him because “what I don't know, I don't think I know” (Plato, 21d5); they can't figure it out. They don't recognize humility.

I wondered, then, as I lived with this text this week, what they would see in *this* encounter, between this Unnamed Woman and Jesus. I have preached this text many times; I've heard and seen this passage as a story of great hope and also one of enduring faith. But this week as I pondered it through the lens of humility---looking for evidences, expressions of this powerfully elusive quality—I began to see the connection between what happens here, what happened in Athens five centuries before Jesus, and what happens to us today.

Let's start in the middle: She approaches Jesus as part of the swarm of those crowding around him; they are pressing in on all sides. He has just returned from across the Sea of Galilee where he has driven demons out of the possessed man of Gerasene into some pigs, causing such an uproar in the local community that they asked Jesus to leave. Jesus is met with crowds, among whom is Jarius, a synagogue official whose daughter lies ill. Jarius begs Jesus to come heal her, and without so much as a word, Jesus follows him, and it is on his way to Jarius' house that he feels something leaving him in the press of the crowd: it's her.

It's this woman, who has been defined for twelve years by a hemorrhagic condition. She has endured the disdain of her community and the label of "unclean" they undoubtedly whispered to one another behind her back. She has been subject to the experiments of greedy doctors who showed no reluctance to take her money without a cure. She is alone—no man escorts her in the street where she finds.... maybe *seeks*...this healer-spirit-worker Jesus. If anyone *deserved* a hearing, it was her. If anyone *warranted* a platform, it was her. If anyone was *due* consideration, it was her. But she asks for none of it. She asks for absolutely nothing here; she simply reaches out to touch the edge of Jesus' robe, all the while guessing, hoping, speculating, believing (?!) that he could make her whole.

She *could* have made a case that she *deserved* healing; many of us do! She could have called him by name, "Hey Jesus!" She could have stopped him in the street: "They say you're a healer; have I got a challenge for you!" She could have demanded his attention, his power. She could have invited him to demonstrate. She could have made a big show of her own faith, won people over to his cause and at the same time repositioned herself in society. Alternatively, she could have gotten away in the crowd scot-free.... but none of that happens. None of it. Without

anyone knowing, she stoops, she reaches, she touches, she believes....and she is healed. And no one would have been the wise if Jesus hadn't called it out.

Jump back in time.... Socrates stands trial for not believing in the gods of Athens and for corrupting the youth. He argues clearly against the charges but is found guilty anyway, not because the accuser had a strong case against him but rather because people didn't like him, didn't understand him, couldn't figure him out when he insisted that he "knew nothing" and that the greatest good was to discuss virtue every day, because "the unexamined life isn't worth living for human beings." (Plato, 38a1-6) When he accepted the charges, refused to break out of jail, and willingly drank the hemlock that caused his death, he did so on his own terms, without fanfare or fuss, demonstrating that his commitment to justice and virtue were of greater value to him than saying the things that make others happy or satisfied, even at the cost of his own life.

These are the people who make us uncomfortable, the people who embody humility. Here's my list of the characteristics they possess; listen carefully. Think about whether you know anyone who lives like this:

- People who embody humility.....don't ask for what they deserve; they ask for wholeness, they ask for justice.
- They don't push their way into anything, they don't make a show of themselves, they don't stir up dust but walk calmly and confidently through our midst without reacting to our self-generated swirl and fuss.
- People who embody humility know themselves.
- They know what matters most.

- Many of them know God, by whatever name that One is called.
- They don't think less of themselves but think of themselves *less often* than the rest of us.
- They are free from the need to be the center of the stage, the only show in town; free from the need to be first, to be right, to be in the spotlight.

They know what it means to be humble yet rather than define it, they live it. To be humble is to “be free from pride or arrogance” (Merriam-Webster). Socrates understood that....so did this woman. And I am still wondering about Jesus....

Now what about Jesus, *here*? Of course, we say he embodies humility, but look closely at *this* moment.... Something happens *to him*. As the woman touches his robe and feels her discharge stop, he senses the touch, even though it is not of his body, and declares that some “discharge” happens to him! The same word is used here: both experience “discharge”. At the same moment when her prolonged bleeding stops something *pours out of him*. And he wheels around in the pressing crowd, asking the absurd question, “who touched me?” Why does he want to know? What does it matter?! If he *knew* what was happening, would he need to ask? And yet, this healing happened *without him* doing, saying, even knowing a thing! Who and what does it serve for him to turn the attention to them both? It was not what *she* sought; why did he?

It's not clear to me why he seeks her, except that when she does present herself, (notice she does not simply slip away), he wants to bless her. He names her, “Daughter,” a term of intimacy and familiarity. He affirms what she already knew: “Your faith has made you well.” And he blesses her with peace and the wholeness she sought so long. And then she is gone. Gone from

the scene, gone from history, but not gone from us. For she lives as an example of what it takes to be humble in this life.

What would it take for you and me to live the same? Each of us has some struggle, some trial, some burden from which we “deserve” to be free. Each of us carries some weight, some history, some pain we long to be released from. So, we might, rightfully or so it seems, make some bold claim upon society, upon those closest to us, upon *God* to right the wrongs, to heal the brokenness, to mend the ruptures; we might *demand* something, anything, so that we might feel good and whole and full and confident again. And we do. Every time we want to be first in line, get the biggest piece of dessert, win the most prizes, take the most time in front of an audience (of 1 or 100), we are claiming something that isn’t ours to claim. Demanding what isn’t ours to own.

What would it take to be humble? It would take freeing ourselves ...from the need to be first or right or best. It would take letting go of the need to assert ourselves, to be recognized, to be loud and rude and in your face. It would mean becoming self-confident rather than assertive, strong rather than overbearing. It would mean attending to our own needs without making them the needs of others. It would mean giving up our need to have it or do it our way. It would mean demonstrating our faith with our actions, not in order to demand a response but in order to evoke one, to lead by example rather than insistence or demand. To live in humility is to claim interior freedom and live it externally. It would take relinquishing our sense of entitlement and substituting it with a sense of service.

This Daughter knew it, Socrates knew it, and Jesus knew it....and we can know and embody it too. Consider what it would mean to reach out to touch the hem of Jesus’ robe...such a

gesture doesn't ask us to reach high but rather to stoop low; that's where we will encounter Jesus face to face.