

The Shame We Carry

Mark 5:24b-34

Good Morning Church Family,

It's good to see you all today. I'm thankful for each one of you in this room.

We're continuing through our series this morning on bodies, the healing miracles of Jesus and really, what it means to be a flesh and blood person in relationship with the living God.

Our text, that Char read for us this morning, tells the story of a woman whose body is in a pretty desperate state. We're told this woman has been "subject to bleeding" for 12 long years. Some texts refer to her disorder as hemorrhaging. Or as a friend of mine frames it, "The woman with the eternal period." It's like her health issue had something to do with the reproductive system and her menstrual cycle, and when she bled, SHE BLED. For 12 long years she has suffered from this. We're not told how old this woman is, but it's possible this had been a struggle for her since she first got her period as a teenager. As is the case in developing countries now, there is a good system for menstrual products for her. Her affliction would have been obvious to those around her, would have created endless amounts of work in trying to keep her garments somewhat clean and odor free, and, as was the case in the Jewish Tradition, when a woman was menstruating, she was ritually unclean. She could not participate in many of the

religious and community occasions when she was bleeding, which, the text seems to imply was most of the time.

Compounding this woman's painful affliction was that she "suffered" under all the doctors she'd seen over the past 12 years in hoping to find a cure, or even just some relief from this eternal period. I know some people in this room know what it's like to "suffer" under Doctors. To be thrown from one specialist to the next, to feel like all they do is an advocate for their own health, to hear one thing from one doctor and another thing from another. Of course when the issue in the body has to do with private areas, each trip to the doctor can become an exercise in awkwardness, embarrassment, and even shame.

Research studies TODAY show that women's health issues are under researched and talked about less with medical students. A Washington Post article from last year entitled, "From Heart Disease to IUDs: How Doctors Dismiss Women's Pain", said "a number of studies support the claim that women in pain often are not taken as seriously as men. Dr. Alyson McGregor, a Medical Professor said, "Particularly in emergency departments, she said, there can be an inherent bias. "There's this assumption that women are emotional and they're anxious and that that's the main issue," she said." What woman hasn't been told by a Dr., "don't worry so much." Or "Sounds like a normal menstrual cycle." Now imagine it's the first century. Was this woman told, "Stop being so anxious", or "it can't be that bad." or "I guess you better find a way to live with it,

because there's nothing to be done." Despite all her efforts to find someone who could help her, the scripture tells us that instead of getting better, her condition worsened.

This woman had suffered. She would not have been able to bear children. Would anyone have married her knowing that? She couldn't participate in community life because she was ritually unclean, and struggled to keep herself actually clean when then bleeding came. The shame of having a body that "didn't do what it was supposed to". The shame of being dirty, ritually and physically. The shame of being dismissed and enduring embarrassing treatments by doctors.

What happens to us, as humans, when our understanding of ourselves becomes about how others see our bodies?

Shame around bodies had been a part of the human story for a very, very long time. In the Christian origin story found in the book of Genesis, God declares the Man and Woman to be Good, their bodies a good creation. The text specifically says, "And they were naked and were unashamed." Yet we see the interweaving of sin, shame and bodies in Adam and Eve's lives after they ate the fruit from the tree. They realize they are naked, they sew garments from leaves to cover themselves and they hide from God. They are ashamed and wish to keep themselves a secret from the one who created them and know them fully. The union of openness and connection between the three of them is broken. They wish to remain in secret, away from God. Many of our cultural ideas about bodies as places of shame can be traced to our interpretation of this scripture. That's another sermon for another time.

When we use the phrase “body image”. When how other people see you, becomes how you define or see yourself. Most people experience wrestling with their body image, this is again particularly true of women in our culture. I struggled mightily with this in my Junior high and high school years because my body was not as small, not as thin as many of my peers and friends and certainly not as small and thin as was the ideal. I wanted so much to disappear, to not be noticed, for fear that people were judging my body.

In her book, *The Wisdom of Your Body*, Christ follower and Embodiment Researcher, Dr. Hilary McBride talks about body image as the idea of the “public body and the private body,”. She uses the metaphor of a house. So imagine that you have a house. You live inside this house, you are always inside of the house. It’s warm, it’s cozy, it’s safe, you have everything that you need. This is your house. It’s good, it’s perfect. One day, you look out the window and discover you have a front lawn. Huh. You keep peering out the window from time to time, and one day you see a few people out on the front lawns of their houses. You step out to see what’s happening. The others are looking at your house. “What beautiful shutters!” they say, this feels so good to hear. “Thanks!” They turn to their own houses and say, “Boy, this roof. I need to do something about it. Looks bad.” You glance back at your roof...is mine okay? If their house looks bad, what do they think about mine? As time goes on, you spend more and more time outside. Looking at others houses, taking in the comments others make, fixing things on your own house. Over time, you begin to spend all your time outside, awaiting comments,

fixing what you've heard is wrong, what looks better. In the end, you forget that your house was a place for you to dwell inside of, a place to feel cozy, safe and good. The same, she says, can be true of our bodies. We can become so caught up in what others may see or not see about our bodies, what others may think or may not think, that we no longer dwell inside our bodies, as whole people, mind, heart, soul and BODY. She talks about this internal and external dialogue as “shame based.”

Let's circle back now to our Biblical text for today. We could imagine that a woman who suffered both physically in her body and socially through physicians and people around her, would be VERY aware of her public body. She knows she is noticed, she knows what people have said, and she also knows how she feels about her own body. Tired. Ashamed. Turned inward with pain.

And then, this body, this good woman, has an encounter with the Embodied God in Jesus Christ. The scripture tells us that when this woman heard that Jesus, this Rabbi who was said to perform miracles of healing, she sought him out. This was her chance. This was the last healer she would try to see, the last hope for a body that had been poked, prodded and then dismissed for 12 years. The text tells us she more or less sneaks up on Jesus, follows him through this crowd of people, thinking to herself, “If only I touch the hem of his robe, then I will be healed.” In spite of everything, this woman believes that Jesus' healing is the answer. She believes that God sees her, that God remembers her suffering. When I have read this story in the past, I have been puzzled over why this woman sneaks up on Jesus. If she is so certain that she can be

healed by him, why doesn't she just go up and ask him? Why doesn't she cry out to him like so many other people in need of healing did throughout the gospels?

Perhaps, it's because, after all she's been through in the last 12 years, she just can't bear to have her public body seen again. If she cried out to him, would Jesus make a comment? Would he ask her to tell her whole story of trauma and suffering again? Had she not told this story to Doctors and Healers enough times already. She'd seen Jesus heal others and she knew how the crowd watched, hanging on his every word, watching the miracle happen. Perhaps she just couldn't bear being watched any more. Her outside body, her bleeding body, her painfully public body. She wanted the miracle, she believed in Jesus, and wanted to go unnoticed. She wanted to remain a secret. So, as this huge crowd is pressing on all sides, she works her way, maybe she feels people staring, maybe they make comments about her body, her bleeding, that's fine, she thinks, so long as Jesus doesn't see her. The scripture tells us that she touches the hem, just that bit of fabric that swings near Jesus' robe as he walks. Immediately, she feels the bleeding stop. The text said that, "she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering." Man, I get emotional reading that. That God cares so much about these BODIES, our experiences of living inside our houses, that merely touching the robe of Jesus allowed this woman to "feel in her body that she was freed from her suffering." Her house was safe again, and she was so ready to retreat back inside.

And then, a second miracle happens. Jesus feels this power go out of his body, feels something in his own body shift, as a measure of God's spirit of healing leaves his body.

He stops, turns looking left and right, “Who touched me?” The disciples look at him like he’s disoriented from too much time in the sun, as they’re being bumped into and jostled from all sides by the huge crowd. Who touched you? Everyone is touching you! Look around!” But Jesus kept looking around, trying to find this person who he knew was somewhere in the crowd. I imagine this woman trying to slip away as quietly as she first slipped up to Jesus. But she sees Jesus is looking, he knows. The crowds are saying, Jesus is looking for someone! And despite all the shame and suffering of 12 years, she goes up to Jesus, throws herself at his feet, and scripture says she “tells Jesus the whole story.” That’s such an interesting line, she tells Jesus the whole story. Did the last 12 years spill out of her? What all the doctors said about her body? All the things that she has missed out on? All the looks, the comments, how very public her suffering has been? I like to think that she let it all out, now that she no longer had to white knuckle it through the pain. Jesus listens, with tenderness, compassion. And then- the second miracle, Jesus says to her, ““Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”

Jesus speaks to her, commends her, blesses her, and not the public her, the public body, Jesus speaks to her, the actual her. The private body. That house that she dwells inside of. She held onto the idea that God saw her and cared for her, despite what she had been through in the past 12 years. Jesus tells her that she is freed from her suffering- not just the physical suffering. Social suffering. The suffering of shame. The suffering of a broken body. Jesus sees her and blesses her in the fullness of who she is. Her body is no longer a place for shame, but a place of blessing.

What I hope we can see and hear in this story and the stories that are yet to come is that our bodies, no matter what society says about them, no matter what Doctors say about them, no matter what a critical inner voice says is that there is no shame in having a body. All bodies are loved by God, blessed by God, and can be places where goodness and blessing (not shame) are reaped. We do not need to sneak up to Jesus to touch the hem of his robe, as this woman understandably did. We can bring our fullest selves to Jesus.

Hebrews 4:14-16 describes Jesus in this way, “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

What a gift dear ones, what a gift. Amen.