

Sermon: If I but touch his clothes

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles PC, June 27, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” That was the thought of an unnamed woman, right before when she came up behind Jesus in a large crowd and touched his clothes, as recounted in the Gospel of Mark 5:25-34. We don’t really know much about her, not her name nor her background, not her ethnic origin nor her social status. What we do know is that she had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years.

The Scripture is not specific about the cause nor the nature of her blood loss, but according to Leviticus 15, her condition would have rendered her ritually unclean, thus excluded from normal social relations. Had she been married at all, her condition would have prevented her from fulfilling her marital duties, thus constituting a legitimate ground for divorce. Furthermore, Mark informs us that she had spent all that she had in search of a cure, but to no avail. She had endured much under many physicians, and her condition only grew worse. It is not unreasonable to conclude that along with her sickness, she was alone, isolated, destitute, cast off, without means, and desperate, yet she continued to search for a cure. She had, in the words of Lamentation, sat alone in silence, her mouth put to the dust, her cheek to the smiter, and she was filled with insults, for twelve long years, yet she continued to hope for healing.

This unnamed desperate woman heard that Jesus was passing near by. Even in a short early ministry to date, Jesus had already garnered enough of a reputation as a healer, a miracle worker. In fact, he was on his way to heal another sickly girl, the daughter of Jairus—a prominent and respectable leader of the synagogue. How this bleeding woman thought that Jesus could heal her bespoke of her desperation.

She could not imagine that Jesus would have time for her. She could not imagine approaching him directly, asking that he lay hand on her—the normal way of receiving a miracle healing. She could not imagine that a respectable teacher, a Rabbi—that is how Jesus was known—would care about her enough to overcome ritual impurity by touching her. So she

thought “If I but touch his clothes”, just a corner, just a sliver, with just an untraceable lightness of touch. No one would notice. Right?

Joyce Echaquan was also in search for a cure. She was an Indigenous woman from the Atikamekw First Nation, a mother of seven children, and a wife to Carol Dubé. On September 28, 2020, Joyce walked into a hospital in Joliette, Quebec, complaining of stomach pain. The Atikamekw community had long complained about ill treatments at the hands of the medical practitioners in that hospital, had long suspected that racism was at play, perhaps institutional and systemic racism. Even though community liaison and translators were available in that hospital for quite a number of years, most longtime practicing doctors and nurses had never utilized those services, many did not even know they existed.

So when Joyce was admitted into the hospital, her doctor and nurses quickly concluded wrongly, with only a superficial examination, that she was simply suffering symptoms of withdrawal from substance abuse. Not long after, her pain in the abdomen escalated, along with her cry for help which went unheeded. In her dying moment, while handcuffed to a hospital bed, Joyce turned on her cellphone and live-streamed her excruciating pain for the world to hear and see. What we witnessed were apathetic and mocking remarks from a number of nurses and patient attendants: *“You made bad choices.” “What do you think your children would think seeing you like this? Think of them.” “She’s only good for sex. And we’re paying for this.”*

Joyce was eventually given a sedative—she was causing too much of a commotion—and left to die alone, in a crowded hospital, surrounded by many healers who would not give her the benefit of the doubt, nor afford her the time of day.

The story of Joyce Echaquan was sadly far from being isolated. Statistics consistently show that prejudice and thus corresponding rates of violence in Canada, against Métis, Inuit, and First Nations women and girls are much higher than for non-Indigenous women, even when all over differentiating factors are accounted for. Some undoubtedly by the hands of spouses or family members, but many suffered at the hands of total strangers. Over the years, many and I stress many, had simply disappeared.

In 2019, after two years of cross-country public hearing and evidence gathering, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous

Women and Girls finally produced its full report, title “Reclaiming Power and Place”.

After having painstakingly interviewed 2,380 family members, survivors of violence, experts and Knowledge Keepers, the inquiry’s conclusion is startling:

“Colonial violence, as well as racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people, has become embedded in everyday life – whether this is through interpersonal forms of violence, through institutions like the health care system and the justice system, or in the laws, policies and structures of Canadian society. The result has been that many Indigenous people have grown up normalized to violence, while Canadian society shows an appalling apathy to addressing the issue. The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls finds that this amounts to genocide.”

American President Harry Truman once said that, “A society will be judged by how it treats its weakest members.” (I think Mahatma Gandhi might’ve said the same thing). Then I say that Canada as a country has been judged, and found wanting.

Why that unnamed woman ever thought that she could be healed simply by touching the clothes of Jesus is beyond me. There was no Scriptural precedent, no mantle of a prophet ever exhibited miraculous power to heal. Nevertheless, she did reach out her hand and touched. Immediately, as the Gospel writer informs us, “her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.”

Also immediately, Jesus felt that power had gone forth from him. He stopped, turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my clothes?” Evidently, many did on that day, as Jesus was surrounded and pressed in by a large crowd. So his disciples replied, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’”

Yet Jesus persisted. He looked all around to see who had done it. So, the unnamed now healed woman came forward, realizing her deception would soon be uncovered. She came forward in fear and trembling, fully expecting a stern rebuke, a public shaming at the very least,

or some other forms of much more severe punishment hidden in the fine print of the Levitical Law.

She fell down before Jesus and told him the whole truth. What happened next, in my opinion, has much to say about who Jesus was and is, and why he was revered and continues to be revered by the poor, the oppressed, the down-trodden, the marginalized, the discriminated, the cast-out and the outcasts, men, women, and girls throughout history even up until now. Jesus said to her in verse 34, **“Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”**

Hallelujah, praise be to God! Jesus has made this unnamed woman whole. He has healed her and cleansed her. He has restored her to life so that she could rejoin the covenantal community. He has commended her faith and given her shalom—a peace that only Christ could give. Jesus blessed her and sent her away, a beloved daughter. To God be the glory, and Jesus was not yet done.

While he was still speaking, some people came from the synagogue leader’s household, informing Jairus of the terrible news, *“Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?”* No trouble at all! Jesus would go on to raise that sickly now dead girl to life, to restore her and to make her whole, just like he had already done for this unnamed woman. But not before leaving everyone with this encouragement, this instruction *“Do not fear, only believe.”* It really does come down to faith, doesn’t it?

By faith, the Presbyterian Church in Canada has repented in the Confession of 1994 regarding injustice suffered by Canada's First Nations peoples. By faith, our Church has committed to the Calls to Action in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People as framework for reconciliation. By faith, our denomination has committed to the Calls for Justice from the final report of the National Inquire into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. By faith, we have committed to the work of healing and reconciliation, through the National Indigenous Ministries Council, and through a wide-variety of life-giving, life-restoring ministries on the ground, across the country.

We do all these, with the hope that our faithfulness shall result in not only a true healing and reconciliation, between people, communities and nations, but will lead to an lasting shalom, the coming Kingdom of Heaven, for the everlasting glory of God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.