

Reaching out (Mark 5:21-43)

The Gospel of Mark tells the story of a precarious moment.

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In the olden days of my youth, I was a hay-baling farmboy. It went like this: My brothers and I would balance on a heaving flat wagon hitched behind a hay baler pulled by an old green tractor. We trundled through the field while the baler swept up a swath of cut alfalfa in front, compressed it into large rectangles with some huffing and thudding, and then pushed the bales out the rear shoot. When the bales reached the tipping point on the shoot, we would reach across the gap between baler and wagon, gaff them with antique metal hooks, and drag them onto the hay rack, where we stacked them like an Aztec pyramid. It was all a little precarious.

The Gospel of Mark tells the story of a precarious moment when a woman reaches out. It's a healing story nested inside a story of resurrection. On his way to raise Jairus's daughter, Jesus is shadowed by a woman who has "been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years." Doctors haven't helped her. She is at the end of her rope, but she has "heard about Jesus," and in the thick of the crowd she dares to reach out and take hold of his cloak.

The healing happens so quietly. Something untwists, and she knows it. Jesus knows it. What's more, the gospel writer gives us a subtle clue that Jesus knows who it is who has touched him. Jesus "looked all around to see who had done it," and as Joel Marcus points out in the Anchor Bible Commentary, that Greek *who* is feminine singular. But the disciples and the crowd are oblivious: "How can you say 'who

touched me?” Jesus not only heals the woman but also sees her. The account ends on a tender note when Jesus says, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

It’s easy to get turned around on the meaning of Jesus’ words “your faith has made you well.” Sometimes, this and other passages like it have been used to blame a person who is suffering when their prayers feel unanswered. *If you only had more faith.*

But faith comes in more than one form.

Sometimes, faith is a solid thing. We take refuge in God and stand on the only foundation that matters (1 Cor. 2:5, 3:11). I experience that live-and-move-and-have-our-being faith as daily life shaped by Christ (Acts 17:28). It’s sustaining and quiet and stable, just who I am and what I do.

But I’ve lived another kind of faith too, a faith in which I reach out and take hold of Jesus however I can—not an arm or a fistful of robe but just the barest little knot of tassel on the corner of his cloak. This sort of faith isn’t entirely explainable—not because it’s ridiculous, an impossible abstraction, but because in faith we’re responding to an overture that we don’t entirely understand from a place that is often heaving and doing something strange in us. There’s no knowing Zen smile in faith like this. We don’t have it together, and our stomachs are knotted up like a wet dish rag. We’ve been bleeding for years. But there he is in the crowd. So.

Ministry has felt like this to me—a stretching through to something, someone, both bright and dark. I’m living Mark 5:27 on everlasting loop: hearing Jesus, coming to Jesus, touching Jesus. Christian faith feels like this. We reach out, and Jesus takes hold of us.