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Sermon 7.27.08
Mark 5:25-34
“Reach Out and Touch Someone”

To set some context for today’s passage, Jesus was out and about, surrounded by crowds. A very important leader in the synagogue named Jairus just came up to Jesus and begged him to heal his twelve-year-old daughter, who was dying. So Jesus is now rushing to the home of Jairus when the following interruption occurs.

²⁵Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years.
²⁶She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. ²⁷She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” ²⁹Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. ³⁰Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” ³¹And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” ³²He looked all around to see who had done it. ³³But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. ³⁴He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

Privacy, in our culture, is a good thing. A friend of mine was putting up new blinds at her cabin recently, and I noticed they were the kind that let light through. Now, when I go to a cabin, I like to sleep in, so blinds are all about light blockage for me. I asked my friend why she had chosen the sheer kind. “They’re privacy blinds.” But my question is, at a cabin, from whom do we need privacy – the deer? Our culture values privacy so much that anything marketed with the name “privacy” sounds good to us. We will buy privacy blinds when no privacy is needed!

Perhaps it is because in this day and age we have to protect our own privacy. We are told to shred junk mail, to make sure no one can see our debit card PIN when we punch it in at the grocery store, to lock up our social security cards. And these actions are prudent; identity fraud is real. But increased privacy seems to be seeping into every level of our social lives – large front porches have been replaced with six-foot-tall backyard fences. I do not want a neighbor to know my business, I do not want a cashier to know my PIN, and I do not want a deer looking at me while I read a book in bed.

In today’s story, we met a woman for whom privacy had been a way of life. She had been bleeding – we assume it was menstrual bleeding – for twelve years. In a first-century Jewish context, a woman having her menstrual period was expected to isolate herself from the community for seven days because bodily fluids were considered ritually unclean. So this woman had, supposedly, been in social isolation for twelve years. The frustration that she felt, the fears of never again being embraced, the embarrassment of being the outcast with no hope of a cure, might have been worse than the physical pain of

the long-term bleeding. Because obligatory privacy had been all she knew, and even now at the time of our story, she was not supposed to be in public, it is no surprise that when she came, she approached Jesus from behind. She would touch his cloak, she thought, not expecting Jesus to give her any personal attention at all. Ideally, she would be healed anonymously (her name never is given), and she could go home in peace.

I wonder, in reading this story, about the things that we individuals need healing for, but have become accustomed to keep to ourselves. I wonder about the Twelve-Year issues – issues that have lingered perhaps not literally for twelve years – maybe it’s more like three months or maybe sixteen years, but because they feel like they could go on indefinitely, I’ll call them “Twelve-Year issues.” Twelve years of loneliness, twelve years of infertility, twelve years of job dissatisfaction, twelve years of dealing with a needy family member, twelve years of an addiction, twelve years of marital tension, twelve years of feeling inadequate as a parent. The Twelve-Year issues are the kind that won’t go away with the help of a physician or a psychiatrist, the kind that we spend all we have to fix, the kind that do not get better, but only grow worse. Twelve-Year issues are isolating in themselves; they whisper to us at night as we lie on our beds that no one understands, that people would think less of us if they knew. Twelve-Year issues are too painful to name aloud when we are praying with others; in fact, we have a hard time praying about them privately. Like the woman suffering in social isolation, we try to deal with our problems, *faithfully*, on our own, behind our privacy blinds. It’s best that way – no one is burdened unnecessarily, and our friends and church community can spend their time working on and praying for things that they would understand: things that are more tangible, more important.

Let’s go back to the scene in the crowd. Jesus was busy on his way to see Jairus’ daughter, who was *dying*, for crying out loud. Surely saving a twelve-year-old girl who is just beginning her reproductive life would be more important than healing a nameless woman whose fruitful years were long gone. But Jesus, not prioritizing one life over another, took the necessary time to bring full healing. The woman was hoping for physical healing – and when she touched his cloak, her bleeding did stop. But Jesus had even greater healing in mind for her. He knew that there was more to this woman’s wholeness than her physical well-being – a wholeness that had to do with the understanding and embrace of her community. Refusing to let her remain anonymous, he asked, “Who touched my clothes?” “And the woman,” the text says, “knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.” It was after she told her story to Jesus in the presence of the people around her that Jesus pronounced her healed and tells her to go home in peace – shalom – wholeness.

Healing comes to individuals and, in turn, to whole communities, when one person risks being vulnerable, when one person reaches out and touches Jesus in the presence of others, and, in fear and trembling, tells the whole truth. Is it risky? Definitely. The people around may not be able to relate. They may prefer that this kind of information be kept behind privacy blinds, because brokenness makes us *all* uncomfortable. But if we keep to ourselves as our culture encourages us to do, we are cheating ourselves and the whole

Body of Christ out of the rich experience that *is* genuine Christian fellowship. We were, after all, designed to live in community, to share one another's burdens. When each of us was baptized as Max was baptized today, we were baptized into a *community* of faith. In the Presbyterian Church, we do not *do* private baptisms to show how strongly we feel about this. The relationship we have with the community of faith is one of the greatest blessings of being a Christian.

Now, there are appropriate settings in which to be vulnerable; I am not saying that we are to pour our hearts out to the cashier at Albertson's or even in front of the church at the time of the Prayers of the People. The best setting, I believe, is the small group: a group of people whom you trust and who will give you the care and the confidentiality that is appropriate to the situation.

Years ago, Eric and I found ourselves unloading our belongings into an upstairs apartment in Princeton, New Jersey. I would be starting seminary in a couple of weeks, and Eric would be job hunting. We knew that our decision to move there would change the shape of our shared future, and we were scared. As we moved in, we saw couples that looked to be about our age pull up in their moving trucks with the same sweaty "what have we done?" looks on their faces. We were pleasantly surprised when one of my classmates invited us to join four other couples for a weekly gathering. The group had already determined their goals: to study scripture together and to pray for each other. It sounded perfect. But week by week, the group norm slowly but surely set in: we would eat dessert, then read a Bible passage, which would lead into an argument dominated by the seminary students about an idea from an Old Testament lecture, which would inevitably lead to complaints about a professor. Being one of the only women students, I felt like I had to represent all women and keep up. Of course, the spouses, who did not attend the classes, sat back with wide eyes and wide yawning mouths during this time. What I had gotten wrapped up in and had fueled by my own participation was a spirit of prideful one-upmanship rather than of vulnerability. Eric and I would leave feeling frustrated with the shallow level of sharing that went on, but we didn't do anything to change it.

Just when we were about to come up with gracious way to back out, someone suggested that we take a weekend retreat together in January for prayer and fellowship. Translated: a whole weekend of heated theological discussions. I couldn't imagine it. But we didn't have the heart to "break up with" the group before the retreat, and we didn't want to offend these people; they *were* our only friends. And this is where the grace of God came in. The first group member who shared a prayer concern at the retreat had just received his fall-semester grades. He had failed one of the main required classes, and he was doubting not just his call, but his worth. When he uttered these words through his humiliation, you could almost see the pride in the air melt away. Some of the group members started to weep; we all sat convicted. I can't describe what ensued in any other way than to say that the power that went out from Jesus was felt by the whole group. Our group spent hours in prayer that day. Each person who shared after that shared more humbly, more truthfully. This one seminary student dared to come out in the middle of the noisy crowd, touch Jesus' cloak, and tell the whole truth, and our group was healed

along with him. Our small group met together for two more years. There were times when the old norms crept back in, and people did not *always* share about their deepest fears and struggles, but the group was there and ready when each person did have the courage to be vulnerable.

In the fall, some new small groups are forming here at Hamblen, and several existing groups will be welcoming new members to join. I hope that each of you prayerfully considers committing to a small group. Or perhaps you simply have a few close friends with whom you can open up with. If you are not quite ready to open up to a small group, you might consider seeing a spiritual director or counselor so that you nurture the courage it takes to reach out and touch someone. My hope as a pastor here is that each of us either continues or starts being a part of the shared healing we can experience as a church.