

Second Sunday of Lent
Taking Jesus Seriously: The Sacred Practice of Neighboring
Mark 5:25-34

I know I've said this to you about other stories of Jesus, but this story really is one of my favorites. And I'm pretty sure it was one of the Gospel writer Mark's favorite stories too. Here's why I think that. Of all those four Gospel writers—Mark, Matthew, Luke, John—Mark is the one who usually tells stories in the shortest form. Mark's biography of Jesus is way shorter than the other three, because most of the time he just gives you the outline of what happened, in very short sentences, and then he leaves all the details to the reader's imagination. Mark was a very clear communicator, but he's a terrible storyteller.

But *this* story—for this particular story—Mark gives more details than any of the other writers. We know more about the characters in this event in Jesus' life from Mark than we do from any of the other Gospel writers. Maybe because he thought this story said something very important about who Jesus is, and what he was here to do.

Jesus is out in a crowd. Jesus was often in a crowd, because early in his career, he got a big reputation as a faith healer, someone who could make sick people well. On this day, Mark says, “a swarm of people were following Jesus, crowding in on him.” Which was a problem, because Jesus was trying to move quickly that day. He had work to do. He was on his way to the home of a man named Jairus, who was kind of an important person. A leader of the community. Jairus had found Jesus and said to him, ‘My daughter is really sick. Can you come, Jesus? Can you come fast? I'm worried.’ So Jesus was making his way there.

And I imagine his disciples were hurrying him along, trying to keep that swarm of people from getting in his way or slowing him down, because being asked to treat one of Jairus' family members was kind of Jesus' big break. It could put him on the map, give him credibility, influence the way other people looked at him, if *Jairus* could see Jesus' power.

So they're clearing people out of the way and trying to keep Jesus from stopping for selfies with whoever asked for one. And suddenly Jesus stops and says, ‘Who touched my clothes?’ And his disciples look at him and then at each other and I bet they got kind of a quizzical look on their faces, because—really, Jesus, you're in a whole crowd of people, hundreds of people, and they're all standing pretty close to you, and now you're worried about somebody touching your clothes? And really, can't we just hurry along here? We've got to get to your next appointment.

But Jesus was right. There was a woman who had reached out very intentionally, and put her hand on the edge of the cloak that hung from Jesus' shoulders down to the ground. She didn't pull at it, or try to take it; she just wanted to touch it. She was hoping that what she'd heard about this man's great power to heal people was true, because she needed healing very much. He would never have time for someone like her, she knew, but maybe if she could just get close enough to touch something that was touching him, she could get a little of that power to course through her body too.

And you know what? She was right. As soon as she put the tips of her fingers on the edge of Jesus' cloak, she felt the sickness leave her body. And she would know; she'd lived with that illness for a long time, years. She knew how that sickness felt; and she knew when it was gone.

That's what Jesus sensed. So right over the objections and *Come on, come on*'s of his disciples, Jesus stopped and he turned around. And the woman was still right behind him, so what could she do? With 'fear and trembling,' Mark says, she 'fessed up. 'It was me. I touched you.' And Jesus might well have just said, 'OK, whatever; I gotta go,' because she was nobody, nobody nearly as important as the family Jesus was on his way to do important business with.

But he didn't say that. Mark says, "Knowing what had happened to her, she fell down in front of Jesus and told him the whole truth." And that whole truth was quite a story, because she'd been suffering with this disease for *twelve years*, and over those years she'd accumulated a whole raft of complaints about doctors who didn't listen to her, and medicines that didn't work, and how the insurance company wouldn't approve some drugs that might have worked if only she had been able to try them, and how her friends and family had gotten tired of hearing how awful this was, and had left her all on her own to deal with this thing that had pretty much ruined her life...until she had no choice but to sneak through a crowd to see if she could get close enough to a faith healer to try one more thing, to see if there wasn't *something* that could make her well

She told him the whole truth. Jesus listened with disciples around him tapping their feet impatiently and rolling their eyes. At the end of her long story, Jesus said to her, 'My friend, your faith has healed you. Go. Be well.'

And I have always wondered what was the healing that mattered most that day. What was it that changed all her days after that? Was it the power that seeped out of Jesus' body without him even being conscious of it, or was it his willingness to stop *everything* long enough to listen to her story?

I recently met a woman named Elaine Heath. Elaine was for a while the Dean of the Duke Divinity School, and before that she was a seminary professor at Perkins School of Theology, where Dirk is doing his doctoral work. So Elaine is quite accomplished in her career and achievements. But she grew up in a very different environment. Her family was poor, and chaotic, abusive. For whatever reason, those parents could not care for their children. Elaine and her siblings often attended three or four schools in a year. One year none of them finished the school year at all, because they never got registered when they showed up in a new town. And because of all that chaos at home and because there was no adult in her life who offered her unconditional love and encouragement, Elaine grew up feeling on the outside of every place she went, every classroom, every possibility of friendship. She knew deep in her bones that she was different, that no one else in her school had a life like hers.

When she was in second grade, one day as her teacher dismissed the class to recess, she asked Elaine to stay behind for a minute. Elaine was sure the teacher was going to point out something she had done wrong, or say how she didn't quite fit in here, or tell her she couldn't come back the next day. Elaine nodded that she would stay, but when the other kids left the room, she hung back at her desk. 'Come closer,' the teacher said. And when Elaine got to the teacher's desk,

trembling, the teacher said quietly, ‘I’ve noticed...that your skin is very dry.’ She reached in her desk drawer and took out a tube of Avon skin cream, and she rubbed a little on Elaine’s wrist, and then she said, ‘You can have this. Take it home with you.’

And for that little girl whose heart was starving for someone to see her and care for her, even just a little, that moment was like healing magic. She left the classroom different than she had been before. All day long, Elaine says, she kept putting her wrist up to her nose, to smell that cream on her skin. And she still remembers the name of that teacher who stopped her work long enough to pay attention to an unremarkable, unkempt student who would no doubt come and go from her classroom quickly. Long enough to give that child something to hang onto until she was healed into wholeness.

That’s what Jesus did. It’s what followers of Jesus do. They stop, and they pay attention, even when they are very busy and they have very important work to do.

There is someone in your neighborhood who is just waiting for someone to see them, and to invite them to tell their story. So that they can be healed of their loneliness. Maybe so you can be healed of your loneliness. That’s why, this Lent, we’re doing this *200 Tables* campaign. I’m inviting you to the spiritual practice of loving your *actual neighbors* by inviting them to share a dinner table in your home. The need is particularly true now that many people are isolating themselves in their own homes. More loneliness will be a side effect of this virus.

We are doing this together, all of us, as we create *200 Tables* of hospitality in our neighborhoods and as we remind each other that when Jesus said ‘Love your neighbor,’ he might have meant your *actual neighbor*.

I know we’re asking you to do something it’s easier not to do. I also know that these next weeks, and maybe longer, you may not want to invite people you don’t know into your home. Maybe you can use these weeks to think and plan how you’ll host a dinner when we come out of our cocoons. Maybe, in these weeks of more-than-usual isolation, we can be even more attentive to our neighbors in other ways. As the wise wizard Gandalf says in Tolkien’s *Fellowship of the Rings*, “All we have to decide is what to do with the time given to us.”