

June 27

What especially caught my attention in today's Gospel story are a just few words about that woman who approached Jesus in the crowd, in quest of healing. Here is how Mark's Gospel tells it: "She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.'"

There is much to ponder in just this one verse, but what especially intrigues me in it is how she "came up behind him in the crowd..." She made, so to speak, a stealth approach, coming not straight at Jesus, but from behind. The woman (whose name we never learn) apparently did not want to be seen or noticed or to cause any trouble. Indeed, Jesus' disciples, who were right there themselves, noticed nothing. They said to Jesus, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?" So up to a point, her strategy worked; she attracted no attention from anyone—anyone, that is, but Jesus.

More about what Jesus' role in a minute, but for now join me to first ponder why she was being so stealthy. What was that about? Her stealthiness really does stand out in the roster of Gospel healing stories. Other people who wanted help from Jesus were very open about it. For example, just a few lines earlier, in the same Gospel for today, Jairus, a leader in the synagogue made quite a production of it. We read, "He fell at Jesus feet and begged him repeatedly," for help for his daughter. No stealth or sneakiness from Jairus!

We might also remember another story, about the blind beggar Bartimaeus. He started shouting so loudly, when he heard Jesus was passing by, that people tried to shush him up. But he would not be deterred. "Son of David have mercy on me," he shouted over and over again! No stealth from Bartimaeus!

Or again, Luke's Gospel tells of ten lepers who stood at a distance, preserving social distance like they were supposed to, but shouted for help: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" No sneaking from behind from those ten lepers!

We could go on. My point is that the woman in today's story did none of these big ostentatious things. She was extremely cautious in her approach to Jesus. Why is that? What was she thinking? Why did she choose to be so stealthy?

Well, one thing she was probably thinking is that she was a woman. By law and custom she was not supposed to approach a man. It would have been unseemly and perhaps unlawful for her to actually touch Jesus.

Another thing she was thinking is that because her health problem was a hemorrhage, she needed to keep her distance. Blood, especially from a woman, was a problem in the purity code in those times.

Finally, maybe she was just tired, or out of practice in dealing with people. Many of us have noticed how hard it was to start to socialize again after

being isolated for Covid. You forget how to interact with people. During all the years that this woman had suffered, probably she had avoided people, and people had tended to avoid her. Approaching Jesus directly was something she just did not feel right about.

Nevertheless, she was desperate. In her great need, she saw an opportunity not to be missed, so she decided to take the risk: but as carefully as possible! She “came up behind him in the crowd and touched Jesus’ cloak.”

Now you and I may not have her specific problem of a hemorrhage. But I bet many of us find it easy to put ourselves in her shoes nonetheless. Lots of us have problems of one sort or another that *just won't go away*. For twelve long years, the woman “had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.” That description of her plight can certainly ring a bell for anyone with chronic medical problems today. Or it could perhaps remind us of, say, relationship issues that never quite resolve. Maybe there is a relative or neighbor who has been weighing on us year after year. Maybe there is a chronic shortage of money. Whatever it may be, the theme of being worn down by the same problem year after year, will resonate for many of us.

And what about her reluctance to just ask directly for help? Can we also identify with that? I think so. Talking directly to God about our needs can be scary. Excuses are easy to find. “Oh, other people have it worse; why ask for a miracle just for me? That would be selfish.” Or, “I am unworthy for this reason or that—haven't been to church much lately, haven't said my

prayers, some dark secret.” Or maybe, “I’m just afraid. Maybe I’ll get in trouble.” Or maybe, “What if I ask and nothing happens?”

In such ways we can get ourselves into a mental state in which we don’t admit the problem, and don’t ask for help, either from other people, or from God. Which is a shame, because, actually God can help. Let me tell a little story about how God helped someone I know. It is based on our very Gospel for this morning.

The wife of one of my seminary professors was struggling with cancer. If you or someone you love has had cancer you know the deep-down dread that brings. Fear is ever present. Well, Barbara (that was her name) felt this dread. A young mother, she had so much to live for! One Sunday she was in church, kneeling at the rail. As she was waiting to receive communion, the very same story we have been talking about-- of that woman who reached out to touch Jesus’ robe—that very same story came to her mind. Barbara decided to do the same thing. She saw the priest coming along the rail, giving out the consecrated bread. “Well, he is a representative of God,” she thought to herself, “I’m going to touch the edge of his robe.” And so she did. When he got to her, she reached out her hand just enough to touch the edge of his chasuble. The priest didn’t even notice, but Barbara did. Immediately she was filled with a deep peace. The cancer was not gone, but her fear was. Her dread vanished, to be replaced with calm and trust. In due course the cancer did go into remission too.

So there actually can be real-world effects; we can still ask for power from God. It is up to God what form the healing will take. But some kind of healing is bound to come.

How then do we work up the courage to ask? I'll bet one reason the woman in our story could find courage to blow past all the difficulties, and sneak up to touch Jesus' robe, was because she remembered her Bible. As part of the Jewish community, she had been hearing encouraging scriptures her whole life, like today's Psalm, Psalm 30. "I cried to you, O Lord; I pleaded with the Lord... You have turned my wailing into dancing; you have put off my sack-cloth and clothed me with joy."

And now of course that unknown woman's story is a part of our scripture. Barbara had been encouraged by that very story. From that story, which she knew so well, Barbara had long since learned what kind of God we have, a God of compassion. A God who wants us to reach out. Jesus did not excoriate the woman for presumptuousness. On the contrary he said, gently, "Daughter, go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

What a lovely word that was: Go, he said. Go, get a life again. The woman didn't have to be afraid to move around in public anymore. She could go places without cringing. Her whole world opened up anew. Her whole life was transformed.

Can our lives be transformed too, if we reach out? If we follow the example of Psalm 30, and of today's other scriptures, and seek God's help with chronic medical problems, those chronic relationship problems, chronic

money problems: will they be made better? Well, it's not magic. I'm not going to promise more than I know. But I do think it's worth a try. If some hands start brushing up against my robes this morning, I'll know some of you agree. Actually, though, it doesn't have to be touching priests' robes: there are lots ways to reach out, like in prayer, or for that matter, in the bread of the Eucharist, and so forth. Something will occur to you, how to reach out, in a way that works for you. The important thing is if Jesus notices. One thing I am quite certain of, is that he will.