

**“Hemorrhaging for How Many Years?” [Scott Kinder-Pyle]  
Romans 4:13—25; Matthew 9:9—13; 18—26**

Some of the words, recorded in the the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, *seem* as if they don’t belong. But then again, some do. For example, the word for *being made well*—*sotzo*-- is the same Greek word that’s used for *being saved*; and that fits. That comports with the gist of nearly every proclamation of the gospel I’ve ever heard or delivered: *Jesus saves. Jesus makes well. Amen!* And yet, here’s the thing: before arriving at the word that we expect, there’s always another word that we don’t expect:

***“Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from HEMORRHAGES ... for twelve years ... came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak...”***

Now, I’m suggesting that we stop right there in Matthew 9:20 and do a little ‘freeze frame.’ In and of itself, the word, *hemorrhage*, should provoke a visceral response; and if you’ve ever experienced a profound loss of blood—a sudden gash, a sudden gush—to have it named like that in the Bible may strike you as a somewhat awkward—as if the gospel writer has violated someone’s privacy, as if there’s been a breach of the H.I.P.A. laws. Think about it. The hemorrhages mentioned here, within the context of *being saved*, cannot help but entangle us. We know that certain gynecological matters are out there. But in here? We may have heard about certain, complicated issues related to the female anatomy, to the menstrual cycle and to menopause. And discreetly we may have experienced them ourselves in the the privacy of our own homes, our own hospital rooms, doctor’s offices or clinics. But here? Here? Here?—when we’re saying nice prayers and singing nice songs about how Jesus saves and makes us well? Can’t we just stick to the spiritual stuff and forego the flesh-and-blood-and gory details?

In the film, *Father Stu*, a Catholic priest almost doesn't become a priest because of the way his muscular disorder affects how he walks and talks and flails his arms. The Monseigneur even worries about the novitiate spilling the Blood of Christ from the chalice when he's serving communion. But my favorite line from the story is when Stuart Ignatius Long says this to his superiors: "We shouldn't pray for an easy life, but for the strength to endure a difficult one." And, if we're honest with ourselves about our own bodies and honest about the woman who suffers from hemorrhages for twelve tedious years in Matthew 9, these are the prayers that are answered. For Jesus to make *somebody* well—for Jesus to save *anybody*—the biblical record shows he does in and through and with the traumas we experience as ligaments, sinews, mucous membranes, muscles and fat—as liver, gall bladder, lungs and heart—as flesh and blood.

Let's review the weaving of today's gospel:

- Jesus calls the tax collector, Matthew, and the very first thing that happens with that call to discipleship is a meal—is a sitting-down-at-table and eating with those people who aren't in the spiritual habit of washing their hands. These are the tax collectors and sinners reaching for their morsels of bread, talking with their mouths full and double-dipping in a common cup.
- And when the Pharisees go to the disciples and complain, the teacher uses a very embodied sort of metaphor: "*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.*"
- However, just as Jesus is teaching on this level, a leader of the synagogue interrupts; his daughter is dead; and rather than go along with all of the funeral festivities—the playing of the flute and the standard commotion—he wants Jesus to follow him back to the bedside, where maybe Jesus would dare to touch the hand of this little corpse of a girl.
- In the middle of all this what happens? A woman with no social standing—a 'nobody'—doesn't feel as if her health problems are worth taking up any of Jesus' valuable time.
- All she wants to do is slide by him, just brush through the tassel of his cloak, the fringe of his clothing. And she's about to get away with it, when Jesus turns, sees her and says, "***Take heart, daughter. Your faith has made you well.***"

And what is this hemorrhagic woman's faith? What does it consist of? Is it a bunch of beliefs that she has to believe in order to get some celestial pie-in-the-sky when she dies? Is it that she attends synagogue and listens to the men say the right words and sing the right songs? It doesn't seem so at all. Her faith—the faith of this particular 'no-body' is to believe or to trust that her bodily affliction matters to Jesus. So how about you and yours?

“None shall pass,” says the dark knight, enclosed in his armor? While guarding the bridge that King Arthur needs to cross, his impassive disposition might indicate a great spiritual strength. But none shall pass? I move for no man? Really? And so, in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, a duel ensues with the clanking of steel and melodramatic music. The battle hasn't gone on too long, however, before King Arthur chops off one of the knight's limbs; and blood hemorrhages out of the arm socket. *Oh well...* Not to be dissuaded, the combatant continues to wield his sword until his other arm is severed from his body—and more blood spurts out. King Arthur then kneels down in formal prayer to thank God for giving him the victory only to be kicked by the knight's legs. “What are you gonna do? Bleed on me?” says the king, before hacking off the remaining limbs... And here's why I think that gruesome scene comes across as so funny: as the knight makes light of his condition—“It's just a flesh wound!”—he's in total denial. Are we? Moreover, the so-called courage that he shows becomes an absolute farce. Why do we find it so hard to believe? Every injury, every disease, every bit of wear and tear on our bodies—every hemorrhage—is an integral part of who we are and whom God, in Christ, salvages, saves and makes well.

Too frequently, I think, those who posture as Christians, picture themselves as these gallant figures who won't compromise and who stand guard at a sacred bridge. But the bridge that's meant to be crossed over and over again is lined with our hemorrhages. And if you don't think Jesus operates like this—if you think he's too high and mighty—take a glance at Hebrew 4:15: ***“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses...”*** And then, Hebrews 5:7: ***“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears...”*** Yes! Jesus makes well! Yes! Jesus saves! But notice, for God's sake, how he's going about it. You and I are *embodied* souls, who hemorrhage not just flows of blood, but loved ones for whom we grieve. Our brains, suffering from dementia, even hemorrhage the memories of those loved ones. Our church communities experience loss upon loss. The *Presbyterian Church (USA)* has been hemorrhaging, on average, 45,000 members per year. The world—God's Creation as we know it—hemorrhages at least 150 species of plants and animals each and every day. Is it time to ignore all that and just get raptured into heaven?

On the other hand, is it time for us to try and fix things? To reverse the trends? I'm not sure.

What I am sure about, by contrast, is that Jesus turns toward the hemorrhages we often turn away from. A U.S. Customs Enforcement officer recently pepper-sprayed somebody in front of a detention facility in New Jersey. But before having his vision obscured, U.S. Senator Andy Kim saw the following [from Heather Cox Richardson blog, May 26]:

- an eighteen year old high school student crying and saying she wanted to graduate.
- a pregnant woman without full OBGYN-care.
- a woman who suffered a miscarriage and hadn't been treated by a doctor.
- a mother who was largely separated from her four-month-old baby.

Now, don't turn away. I mention these vulnerable conditions of vulnerable women because they're related. They ARE related. They're even related to what the Apostle Paul brings to the attention of the church in Rome. He tells the members of that faith community to consider the **"barrenness of Sarah's womb."** And do you remember who Sarah was? She was an elderly woman, well beyond the child-bearing years, whom Abraham impregnates. And the point of that miraculous pregnancy and eventual birth of Issac is how these relationships of faith are intended to be a blessing to all the families of the earth. Not just to American families! Not just to beautiful families with aesthetically beautiful children! Not just healthy families with adequate health-care coverage! Consider the barrenness of Sarah's womb—not because we're all going to heaven when we die—but because when God brings our attention to a body—to any body—to the body of a no-body—it matters to our spiritual growth.

"I learned the truth at seventeen," sang Janis Ian, in the mid-1970's:

I learned the truth at seventeen  
That love was meant for beauty queens  
And high school girls with clear skinned smiles  
Who married young and then retired...

And those of us with ravaged faces  
Lacking in the social graces  
Desperately remained at home  
Inventing lovers on the phone...

But, you see, not any more! In Christ, no *body* needs to remain at home, and no *body* needs to invent a lover on the phone! We've got one. And although, at times, the Spirit of Jesus seems very busy, taking care of everybody else's problems, and maybe more concerned with escorting people to heaven, why not try offer him a hemorrhage? Don't you think he can handle it?

A few years ago, I was sitting in a cushy chair at Starbucks, reading the Bible and trying to mind my own business, when into the coffee shop came two women—one after the other. Each of them wore fairly chic athletic gear, and they appeared as if they had just come from working out and doing some kind of yoga class. I noticed the first woman get in line for her iced triple shot, vanilla latte with almond milk; and during her time at the cash register she received a call on her cell phone. The second woman, coming up behind her, then placed her order with the barista, and waited for her friend to finish her call. Both of them eventually sat down with their drinks; and as the first woman was trying to sign off her phone call, the second woman received a text message and a call herself. So picture the scene: two affluent, seemingly healthy women, sitting across from one another, positioned to have a face-to-face conversation, but each one talking to somebody who wasn't there. And then, I kid you not: after a few minutes of each one texting and scrolling their screens... “We’ll have to do this again some time!”

“Sure thing, I’ll see you at church.” But will she? Will she really see her? Will she really be seen? One of the aspects of Holy Communion that I hope we get is that the meal to which we are invited is an embodied and messy one. There are tax collectors and sinners and hemorrhages here. And we’re not just meant to brush by one another in a crowd. We’re not just meant to chit-chat and shoot the breeze with pleasantries—although that’s nice too. We are meant to participate with our hands, with our feet, with our mouths, with our esophaguses, with our stomachs. And what happens, by the power of the Spirit of Christ, is that we *are* made well. We *are* saved.