

A Lenten Wardrobe: Tassels and Fringes
Luke 8:40-48
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I read my hometown paper a lot online, articles about my old neighborhoods, or schools, about sports and economic possibilities and crime. And then I read the comments from other readers. And then I get really depressed. Everybody, it seems, is grasping for the wrong thing. For example, there was a murder of three people in a barber shop in the Cleveland suburb of Warrensville Heights, and it turns out that the killer, and at least one of the dead men, were members of rival gangs, and that the shooting was likely a question of turf, of crossing boundaries that shouldn't have been crossed. There was a conflict, but the best anyone could do to solve it was kill somebody else. Now three men are dead, another one is going to jail for life, families on all sides are in mourning, children's lives hang in the balance, the government is on the hook for providing for the killer for the rest of his life, and on and on go the ramifications. And all because no one could do anything new. They played the same old game and received the same old result.

The people reading about the crime are generally no more enlightened. The commenters are full of as much hate and venom as the gang members, suggesting lynching, and jailhouse rape, and sterilization as solutions, blaming politicians and the government for the problems, and generally not owning up to the complexity of the issue and their role in it. If there's nothing new in gangland, there's also

nothing new in suburbia. Falling back on racist stereotypes, or partisan politics, they trot out the same tired arguments as always, and wait for the next article to repeat the same old clichés. You can call it human nature if you want, but I call it a lack of courage and imagination. We may be technologically progressive societies, churning out amazing new devices all the time, but in terms of solving societal problems, or coming to terms with our differences and our prejudices, we are a conservative people who don't like to change, who don't like to make ourselves vulnerable by taking big risks like solving our problems peacefully or creating a group identity around positive values, in the case of the gangs, or debunking racial stereotypes by really getting to know people who are different than us, in the case of the internet trolls. If you need a reminder of how glacial is the pace of social change in the United States, read the results of the investigation of the Ferguson, Missouri police department where you find that very little in the relationship between blacks and whites has changed there since the days of Martin Luther King, Jr., some fifty years ago. Yes, we are cowards lacking imagination.

It's like we don't know where to turn. In the face of problems as intractable as poverty and violence, we turn to the easy solutions of guns and stereotypes instead of seeking deeper wisdom. We are desperate for a solution to the ills of our minds, bodies, spirits, and societies, but the best we can do is try harder at what has already failed. Occasionally, occasionally, however, we find a way to break through, and it makes all the difference in the world. Our Scripture passage tonight

tells such a tale, the story of a woman who for twelve years sought a solution to her problem in the same way everyday, until she finally decided to try something new.

(Read Luke 8:40-48)

The woman in our story had some kind of menstrual bleeding that had lasted twelve years, and as a result of this condition, her whole life was chaotic. She was considered ritually impure, which meant she couldn't touch "clean" objects or people without making them impure too. She couldn't participate in religious acts because of her condition. All of this is outlined in the fifteenth chapter of the book of Leviticus if you want to know the gory details. She was an outcast in search of inclusion, and for those twelve years, with good reason, she had turned to the medical community for a remedy, but for all their efforts, and for all her money, they could do nothing for her. We don't know what else she may have tried, or how despised she might have been. We just know she was suffering, and was turning to solutions that didn't work. And then she learns of Jesus' healing powers, and she makes her desperate act of touching the hem, the fringe of his garment, tassels like these that he very likely wore, and she is healed. Her ordeal is over. She can return to a normal life, if it could ever be normal after an encounter like this with God. It took this unnamed woman a very long time, but she finally reached out and took hold of something different. Even though her medical condition wasn't caused by sin, you could say she finally repented, because she turned in a

new direction, changed her mind about what could change her life, and found herself on a new path. She reached out for life, and she received it.

So, about those fringes she touched. They are called *tzitzit*. And they are attached to the shawl, which is called the *tallit*. “Although the Hebrew word *tallit* is not found in Scripture, the biblical command for Israelites to wear a ‘fringed’ or ‘tasseled’ garment can be found in the Torah, in which God says to Moses in the book of Numbers, ‘Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God.’ Later, in Deuteronomy it adds, ‘Make tassels on the four corners of the cloak you wear.’ So the original scriptural intent behind this fringed garment was to remind the Israelites of God’s commandments to them.” The custom of putting the shawl over your head is to help you block out anything but your communion with God as you pray. It allows you to look neither right nor left, but only straight ahead, only at God. You are safely under the wings of God, the word for these fringes and for wings coming from the same Hebrew root. A Jewish meditation pleads, “...may my soul, my spirit, my essence, be guarded from obstructions—may the *tallit* spread its wings over them like an eagle who rouses her nestlings, hovering over her young.”

The cloaks or shawls with fringes in Jesus' day probably didn't look quite like these, but in whatever form they were worn, they were an important part of everyday piety. Some people took it to extremes, like wearing extra-long fringes for show, and Jesus calls them out, but it was, and remains, a commandment kept by faithful Jews. So, we are probably safe in assuming that Jesus was wearing something like this on the day our heroine took hold of his fringes. She wasn't the only one, of course, who believed there was power in those fringes. In Matthew, it tells of hordes of people trying to do just what she did. Some people say it was because they had made a connection with the words in Malachi 4:2, where it says there was "healing in the wings of the Sun of righteousness," the messianic figure to come, and again, those words for wings and fringe are related. But it also may have just been their way of touching greatness, and hoping something good would rub off on them. They wouldn't dare to grab his arm, but if they could just touch that cloak, or those fringes...and in this case, that's all it took.

It would be nice if you could all come up here, and in hope or faith or even desperation, just touch these fringes, and make all your problems go away. But alas, I have no such power to give you in the same way that Jesus did. What I can offer you, however, is this: a Lenten reminder to take hold of the opportunities to repent that present themselves to you. I began this look at our Lenten wardrobe by looking at the clothing of fine linen, pure and bright, that awaits us on Easter morning, and at the great wedding banquet at the end of time. But the journey to

that feast begins in sackcloth and ashes, those traditional and uncomfortable symbols of repentance, of changed hearts and minds, and of turning away from sin, and turning to God. And last week, I wore a traditional clergy shirt with a white tab collar to remind us that there is backup for us when we start to repent, when we start to change. We don't go through this process alone. God is there to back us up, and the church is there to back us up, and we are each here for one another as backup. We are your parachute. But you have to jump out of the plane. You have to take that first, terrifying step. Your journey towards earth may begin with your heart in your throat, and your cheeks pushed back by the resistance you face, but then you'll level out, and enjoy a new view and a new freedom you never imagined possible. And then you'll pull that chute and come in for a soft landing, and appreciate earth again too in a new way.

And so I wear these fringes tonight to remind you of the courage of one who quite literally took matters into her own hands and reached out in a new direction for God. And I wear the cloak as a reminder that God will raise you up on eagles' wings, and bear you safely and securely to your destination. And it doesn't matter whether the change you're making is dramatic or mundane. You still have to reach out and take hold of the healing power in your midst.

Maybe you remember the story of Nicky Cruz, who was once the leader of a New York City gang called the Mau-Maus. I remember as a teenager reading his book, "Run, Baby, Run," in which he describes how he turned from being a violent,

heroin-addicted punk into a believer first, and an evangelist later. He reached out and took hold of what evangelist David Wilkerson was offering in his risky ministry in gang areas of New York. And I read recently about an Internet troll who viciously attacked a woman blogger, even going so far as sending messages from fake social media accounts he created under the name of her recently deceased father. But instead of returning evil for evil, the blogger wrote very candidly about just how hurtful this particular attack had been. And as a result, the troll contacted her to seek her forgiveness, and they later met, and became friends, and he is now a very different person. Whether it was David Wilkerson or Nicky Cruz, the blogger or the troll, each of them risked something, tried something new, reached out for a healing fringe and found their lives very different.

Most of us don't go around thinking of ourselves as sinners in need of repentance. We believe we are basically good people, and that is probably true in a non-existential kind of way. As far as I know, none of you are gang members or internet trolls. Most of us don't strictly break the Ten Commandments and so we think we are ok. But we all need to repent of something, whatever that something is that keeps our attention focused elsewhere besides God, that keeps us pursuing something other than the Kingdom of heaven, that keeps us meeting our own needs rather than the needs of others. The woman in our story wasn't turning away from something evil, but she was turning away from what had failed her. The things we

need to turn away from aren't necessarily sinful in the strictest sense, but neither are they going to save us or heal us.

Let me invite you to take some time this week and think about the ways you really spend your time, and in what you really invest your energy and passion. Examine those areas of your life and see if there isn't some repentance to be done, some turning from those things, however benign they may seem, and turning to the God of glory. And let us all use this season of Lent as fringe, in the way God had in mind in the commandment to Moses: "You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God." Amen.