

Rubbing Off on the World  
Mark 5:21-43  
© Stacey Steck  
Preached June 28, 2009 at San José, Costa Rica

Three years ago, this Sunday, I preached on this very same passage from Mark. And in that sermon, I talked about contagion and contamination, and the role that played in the stories of Jairus and his daughter, and the woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve year. You see, between the desperate woman and the dead girl, there was a lot of ritual impurity to go around. Both women bleeding beyond the regular time of their month menstruation, and dead people, were in a class of unclean that made touching them, or even their clothing, a risky proposition, religiously anyways.

Three years later, I am still thinking a lot of contagion and contamination, both because we are supposedly still in the grip of the worldwide H1N1 flu pandemic, but also because I cannot at the moment touch my son because I have come down with a case of the Shingles. The rest of you need not fear; Julian is offlimits because he is young and immunologically vulnerable, has never had the chicken pox before, and likes to be hugged and held by his father. Those of you who have had the chicken pox have absolutely nothing to fear from me, and those who have not, should simply try to avoid contact with my back, which should not be too difficult. The good news is, of course, that my contamination has not made me religiously impure enough to avoid preaching tonight, as well as the fact that I

may be enjoying the least painful case of shingles in the history of recorded medicine. Praise be to God!

And so up once again comes this story of Jesus and the two women in need of healing, and the question once again of contagion and contamination. And so I looked at it again through diseased eyes, and with a different kind of self-interest, and it turns out that although I was right in what I shared with you three years ago, there is also another correct message about contamination that also needs to be spread. And that message is what I would like to offer tonight.

The Old Testament takes very seriously issues of cleanliness and purity. There are restrictions on touching, or worse, suffering from, all kinds of things that make one unworthy to be in the presence of God or others, until one could be cured, have their health confirmed, and be reintegrated into society. That is why in other Gospel stories, the person who has been made well in their encounter with Jesus is often instructed to go and show the priest, and then once the seven days, or however many required days have passed, they will once again be able to worship, rejoin their families around the dinner table, and be able to stop taking precautions against even accidentally coming into contact with other people and their possessions. Even though this was long before any kind of understanding of germ transmission by molecules traveling from my cough to your lungs, there was still this awareness that contamination was spread when a dirty thing touched a clean thing, even if there were not really any dangerous germs to be shared.

And so it was such a big deal when this woman reached out and touched Jesus' cloak, a big deal because she who was unclean, had now transferred her uncleanness to Jesus in front of a multitude of witnesses. As someone who had suffered so long, she would surely have been known in her community as someone who was unclean, and so even if Jesus had not felt "that power had gone forth from him," someone probably would have told him, concerned that he might now be unclean. And we might imagine what Jairus himself might have been thinking watching this encounter, as an unclean Jesus would have been a useless Jesus, for surely someone unclean could not do the holy work needed to bring his daughter back to full health. For all his deeds of power, most people must have believed that he kept himself in a state of constant purity, that God had blessed him with an ability to remain unsoiled by disease or an accidental brush with a sinful contagion. Remember now that sin and sickness were often linked in the religious mind of Jesus' contemporaries, that a person suffering from illness must have been committed some kind of sin to merit the suffering they were enduring. A healthy Jesus was the key to a saintly Jesus, the kind who could be counted on to do the kind of miracles they sought him to do.

Well, all that is true, but maybe you have noticed that it all looks at the story from the perspective of the spread of sin and disease. We read these stories with a sure knowledge that Jesus is the Son of God and therefore surely cannot have fallen into a state of uncleanness with the mere touch of his garment by a woman

on whom God would surely want to have mercy. We know that in Jesus, God overcame death, and so we know that touching her dead body isn't going to hold back God's power from Jesus' hand. We read the story with a preconceived understanding that Jesus is immune to both bodily and spiritual disease, and that his mere presence is enough to drive out evil spirits and open blind eyes and unstop deaf ears. Not every story of Jesus healing someone includes a retelling of how he actually reached out and touched someone, nearly all of who would have been considered unclean. This is our picture of the Teflon Jesus, to whom neither stain nor sin can stick. And all of that is true. But I think there is something still deeper at work in tonight's story that we should pay attention to, for as much as we ourselves might want to be made of the same stuff as Jesus, we know we are not. We will never be Teflon, nor are we called to try. But neither are we called to be afraid of the spread of contamination and sin. Far from it! Indeed, we are called to carry the divine disease of grace into the world, and infect as many people as possible. Let me explain what I mean.

Implicit in what the hemorrhaging woman says to herself just before she reaches out to touch Jesus garment is the unstated belief that just as an unclean person's garment can make someone else unclean, so can the garment of a holy person make one cured. As I was noting a moment ago, we read this story as if this woman simply somehow suddenly discerned that Jesus' garment had healing powers, or took a midway gamble that even if she didn't touch his skin itself, that

his cloak would be good enough. Sure enough, his reputation and his purity, and of course, her desperation, would have attracted her, but the story doesn't tell us, however, that she very likely knew of the tradition of healing coming from a garment, and the Old Testament stories which show that. Bible commentator Michael Turton notes that in recent years, Biblical scholars "have argued that the underlying concept in this story is still one of contagion, but one that flows not from impurity to purity, but one in which Jesus communicates purity the way an unclean person contaminates, through contagious contact. Arguing that Jesus is being represented as a High Priest in this way in Mark, one scholar notes that there are several biblical precedents for such an outflow of holiness, include some where garments communicate holiness. These include Ezekiel 44:19, where, speaking of the way the High Priests should behave, the text directs the priests: 'And when they go out into the outer court to the people, they shall put off the garments in which they have been ministering, and lay them in the holy chambers; and they shall put on other garments, *lest they communicate holiness to the people with their garments.*' And in Leviticus 21:10-12, we read, 'The priest who is chief among his brethren, upon whose head the anointing oil is poured, and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose, nor rend his clothes; he shall not go in to any dead body, nor defile himself, even for his father or for his mother; neither shall he go out of the sanctuary, nor profane the sanctuary of his God; for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is upon

him: I am the LORD.’ Here the priests are anointed with oil and consecrated to wear the priestly vestments. In Exodus 30:29, God instructs Moses that whatever is consecrated with the oil of holiness will communicate holiness to anything it touches. There are then, it seems, biblical precedents for a belief that garments could communicate holiness like a contagion, if worn by a consecrated priest.” Very interesting stuff, indeed.

Once upon a time, I played on a church softball team. For reasons still unclear to me, there were non-church members on the church softball team, and one day, one of those non-member players on the team found out that I was a minister in training. But after a few minutes of pleasantries, he took a couple of steps backwards in mock retreat and said, “Well, you’d better watch out, we might rub off on you,” to which I replied, “Likewise.” And although I doubt I ever did rub off on him, the conversation has stuck with me for a very long time. You see, we, as Christians, have every reason to believe that we bring holiness and healing into our interactions with other people, or at least as many reasons as believing that others may contaminate us if we hang out with the wrong sort. It may not be that we actively try to avoid coming into contact with people whose ideas about God and the world, or acceptable behavior differ from our own, but I doubt we think any more often about involving ourselves intentionally in situations where we may “rub off” on others in a positive way.

Those Old Testament passages about the healing power of the priests speak of oil and consecration and anointing, and that seems a long time ago, and a long way from our own experience. And so maybe you've never stopped to think about the fact that you are consecrated, that you are anointed. Oh, some of you may have been anointed with oil at your baptism or at some other time in your Christian life, but what I am referring to is your consecration in Jesus Christ, your anointing in the Holy Spirit. Just as we are way past the days of believing that sin can be spread by touching the clothes of a sinner, we are also way past believing that it is only priests or pastors who have the ability to bring holiness and healing, and certainly not only with our clothing. But the divine logic and gift still work. You see, it is not our holiness, nor our Teflon ability to avoid sin that gives us the power to rub off on other people and situations. It is not anything we do, but rather what God does in us and through us that make the difference in the lives of people like the woman who bled for twelve years, of Jairus and his family. You are consecrated, set apart as holy, by the power of God, by the gift of Jesus Christ, and turned loose on the world like a contagion for good, blown by the Holy Spirit, wherever it wills. You are Jesus' cloak, worn close to his skin, and imbued with the power to bring grace to a graceless world, and healing to broken places. But you need to be in places where you can be touched, or touch. You need to be unafraid to walk in the kind of crowds in which Jesus walked, where the risk of holy contagion is as high as the unholy kind. Where is Jesus' cloak at the Hotel del Rey, and the dark

corners of the city park? Where is Jesus' cloak when trees are poached, and sharks are finned? Where is Jesus' cloak as depression sets in and alcohol goes down easier? Where is Jesus' cloak in the prison, in the shack, in the schoolhouse.

I want to conclude with a poem that speaks, I think, to the need we have to put ourselves in the position to spread the divine disease of grace, because the world is waiting for it, the world needs it, and you my friends, have it.

Once there was a wound  
It was no ordinary wound  
It was my wound  
We had lived together long.  
I yearned to be free of this wound  
I wanted the bleeding to stop  
Yet if the truth be known  
I felt a strange kind of gratitude  
    for this wound  
It made me  
    tremendously open to grace  
    vulnerable to God's mercy.  
A beautiful believing in me  
    that I have named Faith  
    kept growing, daring me  
    to reach for what I could not see.  
This wound had made me open.  
I was ready for grace  
And so one day, I reached.  
There I was thick in the crowd  
    bleeding and believing  
    and I reached.  
At first I reached  
    for what I could see  
    the fringe of a garment,  
But my reaching didn't stop there  
    for Someone reached back into me.  
A grace I couldn't see  
    flowed through me.

A power I didn't understand  
began to fill the depths of me.  
Trembling I was called forth  
to claim my wholeness.  
The bleeding had left me.  
The believing remained  
And strange as this may sound  
I have never lost my gratitude  
for the wound  
that made me so open  
to grace.

Amen.