



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT
Session 2

Jesus Sees Women: An Adult Lenten Study

The Woman Who Stole Her Healing

Introduction

There are two Gospels that include the story of a woman who touched Jesus and was healed. In Mark's version of this story, the incident happens inside another story: the raising of a twelve-year-old girl.

By this point in Mark, Jesus had performed many deeds of power. The people in the Gospel and later readers understand that Jesus was a very great healer/exorcist and that he employed his divine power across all kinds of social barriers, particularly across the powerful ethnic and religious barrier dividing Jews from non-Jews, or Gentiles. By the time Jesus and his disciples got to this point in the Gospel, they had just come back from a mind-bending trip across the Sea of Galilee to non-Jewish territory. There Jesus cast out a powerful demon with the politically charged name of Legion—the same name as the Roman armies (5:1–20)!

Jesus had also performed mass healings, first in Capernaum, of everyone in the city (1:32–34). Then in chapter 3, he performed another mass healing, this time with people present from all over the region, without distinction as to ethnic or religious identity (vv. 7–12).

There the unclean spirits proclaimed and worshiped him, saying “you are the Son of God,” which was an imperial title.

Another key feature of Jesus' healings/exorcisms is that he did them entirely free of charge, a fact that was just as remarkable two thousand years ago as it is today. Jesus was certainly not the only healer or exorcist of the time, although the scale of his deeds clearly surpassed those of any others. But the other healers made sure to charge plenty of money (just as they do now)—so much so that they even brought some people to financial ruin (just as they do now).

Jesus' disciples were quite aware of the enormous financial, social, and political potential their master had, and they were always on the lookout for ways to enhance his and their standing in this regard. In chapter 1, after the amazing success of the mass healing of Capernaum, Jesus went out early in the morning to pray alone at a local holy place. Mark tells us that his disciples “hunted” for him (1:36). His disciples fully intended to keep Jesus in Capernaum, likely in Peter's house. Even if their master wouldn't charge money for his healing work, the people who would surely be

coming to Capernaum to visit this great healer would need lodging and food, wouldn't they? Jesus dashed their hopes of setting up "the Great Healer of Capernaum" by telling them that they had to go to the other towns of Galilee for preaching (1:38).

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By the time Jesus and his whole group of disciples got back to Galilee in chapter 5, he had done many more healings and exorcisms in many more places, including a major one in Gentile territory. His disciples followed along patiently, seeing and hearing evermore amazing events and claims about Jesus. Then, in a stroke of great blessing, they were all met by a Jewish VIP, one of the leaders of the synagogue (5:22). Synagogue leaders were much more important persons than present-day religious leaders, who for the most part become important persons only on the one day of worship. At that time, they were both religious and civic leaders—the city council as well as the board of the synagogue.

Some grumbling and criticism had already begun to be made of Jesus and his followers from both Jerusalem and Galilean leaders. These criticisms were serious, as they carried a threat of violence with them. At Mark 3:6, there was already a conspiracy afoot by the powerful Pharisees and Herodians to destroy Jesus. So it was very good news, at least to Jesus' disciples, that this Jairus now sought out Jesus and begged for his help. The man's appeal was earnest and strenuous, and he begged repeatedly on his knees before Jesus. And there was also hope in that the girl was still alive. Surely Jesus could save her! The whole town went along with Jesus to Jairus's house as the problems of this important man became everyone's problems. Patriarchal culture says that everyone must take care of important, honorable men. From the point of view of Jesus' disciples, things were going very, very well.

The Unseen Woman Who Interrupts Progress

Then something strange happened. The least important person in the town, someone shameful—a non-person whom no one even sees—got in the way.

In a patriarchal society, this woman was useless and apparently cursed by God. As with all women at the time, her utility and importance to the town lay mainly in her ability to bear children. She had had money (apparently inherited), but she couldn't become a wife because of her defective or diseased uterus. Not only was she considered shameful because of her inability to have children, but she had now lost all her money, wasting it on doctors.

So the one point of honor she had, money, was now gone. Even the very fact that she had once had money meant that she had no male relatives, for if she had had them, they would have inherited that money instead of her. She was triply shamed, without family, without the ability to bear children, and without money. She was desperate, alone, and shamed.

About Shame and Honor

Before we continue with the story, we need to reflect on shame and honor. Cultural anthropologists talk about honor/shame cultures. Honor and shame are the internal ways that patriarchal societies reinforce behavior and social control. Violence is often not necessary in such societies (although it does most definitely play an important role), because the society's members police themselves, their own behavior, and their social relations, in order to avoid shame and to gain honor. In this way, people mostly carry out their own oppression, such that the elites do not have to violently enforce the society's oppressive structure. Most of the oppressive social control in patriarchal societies is carried out by the members of the society on themselves and one another through their internal sense of honor and shame. This is how patriarchal societies cause individuals to act against their own best interests, in favor of the powerful.

There is a kind of market in honor, as it can be won, lost, or traded because the honor/shame cultural system is a *closed system*. There is only a fixed amount of

honor, and not everyone can have it. Honor can be gained through money, birth to an honorable family, marriage to an honorable family, and giving birth to boys. Losing or never having any of these means losing honor and gaining shame. There is an infinite gradation of honor and shame, and members of these societies are constantly evaluating everyone in terms of how much honor or shame a person has. Money, family, fertility, and gender are key to having, gaining, and maintaining honor and avoiding shame. In this context, even the relationship to God is part of the closed honor and shame system. Being an important religious figure also conveys honor. God is the source of both fertility and wealth (see Deut. 27 and 28) and so becomes a key source of honor. Another part of the honor and shame dynamic is that honorable men will receive gifts just because they are honorable men (as in the case of this synagogue leader), while shameful people will have things taken away from them just because they are shameful persons (like this woman).

The big question in this story is why the woman didn't simply ask Jesus for healing. He would surely have agreed. He had healed much harder cases than hers, had never refused anyone, and didn't charge money—she could simply have asked. But her shameful position within the town prevented this. To ask would be to make herself, and therefore her triple shame, public—which was something she was bound not to do. There is a significant possibility that had she tried, she would have been laughed out of Jesus' presence by all the townspeople. According to the honor and shame system, she didn't deserve to ask. And after all, Mr. Important Honorable Synagogue Leader had begged Jesus for help, and Jesus and everyone else were on a mission to deliver just that. His little girl was at the point of death; Jesus had to come immediately.

So the shamed woman made a momentous decision: she would steal her healing. That is, she would steal from God. Jesus' healing power was from God, so when she took it without asking, she was stealing from God.

In her own way, though, this woman also showed exactly the kind of faith that Jesus was always looking for—a kind of daring,

reckless, risky gamble that ignores and even upsets social, political, and religious proprieties, all honor and shame—so long as it aimed for good rather than evil. She completely defied the honor and shame system while appearing to keep it. She was admirable in her daring and recklessness; this is why the evangelist Mark tells us about her. She was the heroine of this story, the model of faith that Mark wanted us to know, remember, and honor.

And her gamble paid off. She touched Jesus' cloak, and just as she guessed would happen, she was fully healed. But she didn't think about the full consequences of her gamble.

Jesus felt the power leave him, and he then did exactly what his disciples didn't want. He stopped the parade toward the important man's house and started asking, "Who touched my clothes?" (Mark 5:30). His disciples' irritation was obvious in their testy response: "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" (v. 31). Their master was not doing the right thing, and he was wasting precious time by asking a stupid question.

And then it got worse. Jesus started going through the crowd looking for someone whose face he hadn't seen before, forgetting about the synagogue leader's daughter. Mark makes it clear that Jesus' searching took quite some time: "He looked all around to see who had done it." The woman, now terrified, came forward trembling to confess what she had done.

Why Search for Her?

This leads us to the second big question of the story. Why was Jesus so determined to find this person? Why wasn't he satisfied with his disciples' reasonable observation?

Let's think of what might have happened had Jesus not looked for this woman. Let's say she stole her healing and just got away with it. What would have happened?

So the shamed woman made a momentous decision: she would steal her healing.

In a small town like this, everyone knew everyone else, and all their relations, and all their stories too. Not

only was it a small town, but the honor and shame culture required constant monitoring and evaluation of everyone's relative status, even those who were at the utterly shameful bottom of the society. Eventually people would realize that this most shameful woman was no longer sick. She was well, and they would know that Jesus, the great healer, had just come through town. If *no one* saw or heard her ask to be healed, the questions would then come thick and fast: How did you get healed (you shameful person who deserves nothing)? When did this happen? Who did this to you? We know you didn't ask for it from Jesus! Has a demon done this to you to trick us? And perhaps the most outlandish question of all would occur to someone: Did you *steal* your healing from Jesus?

The scandal would be enormous, and her life could soon be at great risk. There's no rule at all about what the punishment is for stealing from God. Who could even imagine such a thing? But that wouldn't stop people from imagining that the punishment must be dire indeed.

This reckless woman saved herself physically, but in doing it this way, she also doomed herself socially. Jesus knew he had healed someone physically, now he also had to save this person socially, that she might be made fully whole.

Jesus Sees Her and Changes Her Story

She came forward trembling and confessed "the whole truth" (v. 33). It was just as damning as anyone might have suspected. The surprising and important thing for us to see is that Jesus immediately began to change her story. We might piously assume that Jesus was always piously good, never telling anything less than the truth and always obeying all the rules. But that is not the case. He was not big into obeying all the rules; indeed, he broke several of them. And he could change someone's true story when necessary for that person's salvation. He did so for the woman who came into the Pharisee's house in Luke 7:36–50, and he did it again here for this woman. He gave her another way to see herself, and in so doing, he also gave us another way of seeing her, each other, and ourselves.

"Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease" (v. 34). We know

that that is not the same as what actually happened. We know that God's power passed through Jesus to heal her. We know that she was already freed from her suffering. But Jesus' story is better in a number of ways.

First, Jesus changed her status on the local honor and shame scale, from "that shameful woman" to "daughter," from a woman whose very existence was unclean to a fully honorable member of society. She was not a thief; she was a healed daughter! She could get married now that fertility and honor were restored to her. *Second*, Jesus even removed himself and God's power from the story. It was *her faith*, as reckless and dangerous as it was, that healed her. She was both healed and honorable. Jesus healed both her physical illness and her social sickness. *Third*, he remade her recklessness into faith.

However, not all was made well. Her recklessness had actually ended the life of the synagogue leader's daughter. This reckless woman became a daughter, but the synagogue leader lost his. The time Jesus spent (wasted, if we were to ask his disciples) with this poor, shameful woman resulted in the death of a young girl.

Jesus and Death

Jesus is very different from other people regarding death. While a terrible storm was beginning to sink his boat on the lake (4:35–41), he stayed asleep on a cushion in the stern and then acted without fear when the screaming of his disciples woke him. In this story he treated death like sleep, something to be woken up from. When it came to his own death, he faced it courageously and with control while everyone around him was losing their minds (ch. 15).

We live our lives in fear. We believe in death, and we accept fear as natural and necessary. But Jesus knows better, and he alone shows us the way out of both fear and death. He knows that death is finally unnecessary and that the day is surely coming when God will end it. He knows that the real opposite of faith is not unbelief, but fear. He never tells us to fear, and he often exhorts us to believe, as he said to the girl's father "Do not fear, only believe" (5:36). That is how free people live, and as the apostle Paul said, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1). Jesus' saying "Do not fear,

only believe” gives us the words that help us become free from our overlords who tyrannize us through our fear of death.

Jesus went on to raise a girl from death, making it very private, so that he wouldn’t be honored because of it. He approached death like we might approach sleep. Jesus saw a woman, even when she was hiding in shame and fear; he saw the power of God over death, even when those present could not see it. In healing a dishonorable woman and raising a girl to life, Jesus

taught people, then and now, how to look and how to see.

Cynthia Holder Rich and Mark Rich are on the theology faculty at Tumaini University Makumira, Arusha, Tanzania. Cynthia is a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) minister, and Mark is ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Previously, they have served in pastoral ministry in the United States and theological education in the United States and Madagascar.