



“One Blood”

Scripture – Luke 8:43-48

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Pat Weikart

Sunday, July 14, 2024

“Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for 12 years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. She came up behind Jesus and touched the fringe of his clothes and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. Then Jesus asked, “Who touched me?” When all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you.” But Jesus said, “Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me.” When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him and how she had been immediately healed. He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.” Luke 8:43-48

Thank you, Rev. Jones, Rev. Getty, Dr. Thurman, and all of you, for the privilege of this pulpit and for the consideration of your Mission Committee as we explore the possibility of collaboration in an opportunity I will describe. I last served a church as head of staff at the First Presbyterian Church in Pitman, NJ. I loved to quote poetry to the congregation and when I left that call in 2016, the church gave me the pin I am wearing today. It is one of a kind; two concentric circles; one small and another larger one surrounding it. It represents my favorite poem by Edwin Markham—We drew a circle that left them out—liars, heretics, people to flout, but love and I had the wit to win, we drew the circle larger and let everyone in! Thank you for drawing the circle large enough to let me and so many others in.

Would you pray with me please?

Precious Jesus, please interpret my words so that you write your message on the hearts of all who hear my voice this morning. Use me as an instrument of your peace and thank you for the privilege to serve. Amen.

No one saw her, not even Jesus at first, the woman with the issue of blood. Before that, no one heard her and perhaps worse, no one believed her. Have you ever been concerned, maybe even afraid, to make an appointment with a doctor? And then when you finally muster the courage to go, have you ever felt intimidated, embarrassed even, or uncertain that they truly took the time to understand you? Or maybe

they just wrote a hasty prescription that didn't seem to help at all? Or maybe they just told you it was "all in your mind."

Beloved, let us remember that there is a Greater Physician.

I am suggesting that this woman who had suffered hemorrhages for 12 years, was exhausted by her condition on the day she decided to brave the crowd surrounding Jesus and take a leap, perhaps a lunge in faith. She couldn't get in his line of sight, but somehow, she knew, even if her hand just brushed the fringe of his cloak, that would be enough—the combination of her faith and his power would heal her. Until that moment, her sorrow was in her blood.

One Fall morning in 2021 while I was working as a palliative care chaplain at Nemours Hospital for children, I was summoned to the bedside of a 17-year-old high school honor student. We will call him Brandon. Brandon had been in the hospital for 12 days suffering from pain that no one could stop. He was becoming sad, frustrated, angry and he asked a question that no clinician felt comfortable answering. His question was, "Why has God cursed me?" Like the woman in our Scripture, Brandon's sorrow was in his blood. He was managing sickle cell disease, an inherited blood disorder that causes the red blood cells—the cells that carry oxygen to all parts of our bodies—to weaken and die. As that happens, they shrink, become brittle, stick together in our vessels and block blood flow randomly to any part of the body. The pain from this blockage can be unbearable. If you want to try to approximate it, take a rubber band and wrap it as tight as possible around one of your fingers and see how long it takes you to feel real pain before you release the band. Now imagine, not being able to release it at all. That will give you some idea what Brandon was up against.

I entered his hospital room, sat down, and asked him about his question. I have learned in these moments that listening is always necessary before trying to answer anything. I discovered that Brandon is a beautiful young man with two younger brothers, working at a lumber yard 30 hours per week to help his mom, who is working two jobs, to support their family. He had no car, but he did have four back-ups who could help him get to the hospital in an emergency. You see, if you can receive pain medicines within 2 hours of a sickle cell pain crisis coming on, often you can be treated in the emergency department and released to home from there. But no one was available to help him that day, so he hitchhiked to the ER, and by that time his pain really had settled in.

As Brandon was sharing his story, we heard the doctors and nurses conducting daily rounds in the hallway outside his room. When it came time to round on Brandon we heard these words—"maybe he is just seeking drugs, maybe the pain isn't as bad as he says, you know, he has threatened harm to himself before, maybe he needs a referral to a behavioral health institution." Had we all listened more closely, we would know that Brandon did not need a behavioral health institution, he needed a ride to the ER.

The woman with the unrelenting hemorrhages didn't need a bunch of physicians to ignore or disbelieve her—she needed a place, a person who would welcome her touch, grasp her story, and heal her. She needed someone who would honor the one thing she brought to her battle—and that was her faith. That was her superpower. Brandon's question also revealed his faith; voicing it was, his leap.

But once you take a leap, what happens next? This is where the silence of scripture can be deafening. How did the encounter change the woman, her life? What did she do after her blood was no longer her

sorrow? When you decide to become a disciple of Jesus and accept the saving power of his blood, then what?

Blood begets many questions; it can be a messy business.

After awhile very few people wanted to touch or even come near the woman in our text. I think Brandon also felt the stigma of his diagnosis compounded by an outrageous history of racism in our country which, wrongly and often, told us that sickle cell disease is a black-person's only diagnosis. Blood is the source of life in all creatures—it bears the spirit—the oxygen, if you will, that all living cells need to thrive.

When Jesus concluded his ministry on earth and gave us the gift of holy communion, he crushed the usual assumptions about blood and God. Yes, he carried on the Old Testament understanding that blood sacrifice was an instrument of atonement—making us at one again with God. But in Leviticus 17:10, God instructs “If anyone eats any blood, I will set my face against that person.” And then at the last supper, Jesus said, “Verily I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” (John 6:54,54) People struggling to understand our love of Jesus from the outside, were incredulous to discover that it seemed as though we drink our God's blood and eat his flesh. Even more mind-blowing was the God/man who apparently laid down his life for the love of mere humans? How dominant could a group of people become who are empowered by the blood of God? Fear and revulsion contributed to the curiosity about Christians. Jews who refused this interpretation of the wine and juice of the Seder meal saw cause to separate the Jewish Jesus from his community of origin. Opportunists from all walks of life exploited this division and began to categorize fellow human beings into people of inferior and superior blood. Certainly, this was not the only factor that separated us from each other, but by the 15th century there were clear delineations of superior and inferior people based on our constructs about the quality of their blood and their being. When Coumbus sailed to the Americas under the flag of Spain, he sailed under the authority of a government that believed that only people of White Christian blood were worthy to own land, hold public office, testify in legal proceedings and so on. Our sorrow stayed in our blood.

But we don't need to live this way anymore. We can take a leap.

When I left Brandon's hospital room that day, a question was written on my heart. “Pat, will you let this stand?”

I interpreted that question as a query from God asking me if I was ready to challenge the status quo, where kids of color and their parents and families who manage sickle cell disease do not have access to the basic things they need to care for themselves. In short, I was being asked if I was ready to take a leap. I wasn't sure, but I had to respond. So, I leapt into discussions with 121 patients and family members to find out what they needed to manage sickle cell disease so that they could live abundantly without it managing them. These interviews revealed that children and families managing sickle cell disease have many unmet needs that would help them take better care of themselves. With a clinic visit lasting an average of 12 minutes, patients receive a packet of information describing what they need to do in between visits, but a set of papers is not the actual tools they need to comply with these recommendations.

The non-profit I direct with two mothers of patients managing sickle cell disease is the manifestation of what we learned in this research. Our nonprofit is called the Healing Tree SCD. We exist to put these tools in the hands of our patients and families so they can take the best care possible of themselves. These tools are medically prescribed groceries; emergency and appointment transportation to the hospital and clinic; regular meetings where clinicians and patients can meet outside the hospital without a 12-minute time constraint to discuss the latest treatments; tutors to help kids who have missed school due to hospitalizations to catch up with their work; vocational and education assistance; heating pads and mentors to help young people transition from pediatric to adult care. We have just begun to serve young adult patients at Wilmington Hospital in addition to patients from Nemours.

We need more help and would very much like to collaborate with you at Westminster. Specifically, we can use Food Coaches to help families make the best use of our medically tailored grocery program; people who sew who might make some heating pads; we could also use access to a classroom space once a week for tutoring. I know your mission committee is supportive of this work, but a volunteer who is willing to act as the liaison/contact between the Healing Tree SCD and the church is needed. Your wonderful church is doing a great deal in our community, and I am not here today to overtax you. I am here to pray and discern with you as to whether it is time for us to take a leap of faith together.

When one person, one body, one congregation, has the courage to take a leap of faith, it can set off a chain reaction that builds the beloved community. In the presence of Jesus, we understand that one powerful way to interpret the gift of holy communion is to remind us that we are together – one blood incarnate in the man who showed us how to lead with love consistently in relation and in service one to the other. The writer of the book of Acts reinforces this call to unity and equity: “From one blood God made all nations to inhabit the earth; for in God, we live and move and have our being.” Acts 17:26-28.

One leap of faith can lead to another and another that results in us building something truly transformative in Jesus’ name. I pray that we are doing just that in making the Healing Tree SCD a reality. We know that we share one blood. We cannot allow ourselves to be divided in any way anymore, because nothing can separate us from the love of God that binds us together in this healing work. I bless you for your wonderful work; I thank you for your prayerful consideration, and I praise God for all that is to come. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.