

“Asking for What We Need” by Pastor Leah Rosso

Genesis 12: 1-9; Matthew 9: 18-23

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Some people’s stories in the Bible stick with you, even when we don’t know their names. I don’t know when I first read this story about the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. She shows up in three of the Gospels, and Matthew’s Gospel actually has the least to say about the story in general. He only gives us the sparse details. But he does give us something we so *rarely* get in scripture — he tells us what she thinks. “If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.”

This is a startling declaration of faith, although admittedly it’s muttered under her breath, so declaration might be the wrong word. But even so, there’s an urgency, isn’t there; a desperation we might say; a resolve that propels this woman forward to touch Jesus’ garment. And the irony here couldn’t be more clear: while one of the minor laws in Leviticus says that women who are bleeding make people unclean when they come into contact with them; this woman, by reaching out and touching Jesus, makes herself clean. A reversal happens. Her pain, her sorrow, her exhaustion drives her to reach out for help, and in that reaching, she is healed. But that’s not the end of the story. Even though Matthew tells us all of that in two sentences, the story isn’t over with her healing. Because this woman, who was trying to stay hidden in plain sight, clearly used to not being seen or paid any attention to, must’ve been startled when Jesus turns around and says to her, “Take heart, daughter, your faith has healed you.”

What gives me goose bumps when I hear this story is that this woman knows what she needs and she plainly goes for it.

In Matt Miofsky’s book, “Let Go,” he shares that when he was younger he thought he had to have it all together, that he needed to cover up his failures because people would think less of him if they knew. But at some point he realized that what people actually needed was to hear about the times when his world fell apart and he made it through anyway. He writes, “Our strengths are of little interest to others. It is our weaknesses that make us interesting and our struggles that give our life texture and depth.”

Our strengths are of little interest to others! Isn’t that disappointing?!?! We work so hard to be good at things; to figure out what we’re good at; to figure out what our strengths are so we can minimize our weaknesses. And yet, when I read those words, “our strengths are of little interest to others” I realized how true that is. When I think of the people in my life whom I am closest to, who have made the greatest impact in my life, it is the ones who have dared to be vulnerable with me; share when life was too hard or when they failed at something; because in being able to share that with me,

they have made room for me to be vulnerable with them — to not have to be anything other than who I am. My brother and I grew up in the same house four years apart, and while being his younger sister I thought I knew all of his weaknesses and mean parts, we never talked about it. He never shared anything vulnerable with me - I was just his little sister! But when I was in college, I remember him writing letters to me because I was living in Zimbabwe and it was expensive to call or to dial up web services. And through those couple of letters, I learned so much about him because he wrote down what he was experiencing and how he felt about it. Then, just about a decade ago, he was going through a difficult time when he was really hurting and he reached out to me by phone. We came to the conclusion in that conversation that we should talk weekly, at least for awhile; and we have never stopped. I would never ask that he go through that time in his life again, and at the time, I would've taken away his pain if I could have. But the truth is, if he hadn't been going through hard things, or if he hadn't been willing to say what he needed to get through that time, we wouldn't be nearly as close today; wouldn't be the support we are for each other.

Think about the people you rely on; the people you are closest to, and I guarantee that you have been with them through some of the most difficult times of their lives, or they have been with you through the low points of your life, or both — because it seems to be the case that God has created us to share what is hard; why we can't be close without having to share hard stuff, well that's a question for God! But I know none of us are great at it. It's one of the things people tell me more often than anything else — I'm horrible at asking for what I need; or I despise having to admit that I need anyone at all. None of us are good at it. But this kind of sharing and vulnerability with each other is crucial for deep relationships and is sacred work in community. God invites us to recognize that it's hard and to do it anyway. To be courageous enough to share in each others' lives because it is in that sharing, that God is able to do amazing things in our lives.

We don't get to know about any of the other moments of this courageous, resilient, woman's life; but we do get to see this moment when she dares to come to the public sphere where she is definitely not welcome; she reaches out in vulnerability and hope for the healing she knows she needs; and where she finally finds relief and connection and public affirmation because she is courageous enough to be vulnerable. I don't know if you caught that part of the story. It's fairly obvious that the woman comes to find healing in a way that will keep her in the shadows, a place she is used to living, but Jesus knows that her bleeding has kept her on the outskirts of community for twelve years — twelve years — and so he commends her in the public space; he sees her; and he bears witness, in front of everyone, that she has done what is faithful, ensuring that she can come back into community. He gives her what she can't give herself - healing within community.

That's one of the stories that Matthew tells in these few verses, but there is another. Matthew tells the story of the woman *in-between* another story- a story about a young woman who is ill. A story about a man with all the privilege in their world - for he is a synagogue leader - and he comes to Jesus publicly; out loud; perhaps hoping that his authority as a synagogue leader will impress upon Jesus the need to come quickly. Of course, as a father he is going to use every tool at his disposal to make his daughter well. And so he comes and kneels at the feet of Jesus, begging him to heal her. Was he impatient when Jesus turned to focus his attention on the older woman? We don't know, but I would be. What we do know, is that Jesus takes this public leader who comes in all vulnerability and courage and walks him out of the public sphere. He goes to the man's home; he sends all the servants away; and he does exactly what the man asked him to do - he lays a hand upon the little girl and she immediately gets up and is healed. These parallel stories are told in exact opposite ways - even to the point of sandwiching the healing of an older woman inside the story of the healing of a little girl. And, in fact, two different words are used for healing in these stories - the two Greek words, *sozo* and *zao*, which can mean resurrection, salvation, restoration, health, to thrive, to survive, to be healed... it goes on and on. I don't think these things are by accident. I think the writer of Matthew knows with utmost certainty that not everyone is healed; that all of us who hear these stories and are in need of healing will be tempted to want to know the formula to be healed ourselves. We want the ten steps; the magic potion; the right words; a strong enough faith. And so Matthew shows us that for each person, healing is unique. Jesus doesn't treat them the same; Jesus doesn't say the same things; the intentions and actions and prayers of the older woman are not the same as the synagogue leader. And, in fact, one girl has been sick for a short amount of time and the older woman has been bleeding for twelve years. It's not fair. It's not equal. It's not the same. And we shouldn't pretend that it is.

I don't know why some healing doesn't happen until we go to be one with God in the next life. I don't know why some healing is easy and some takes a lifetime. But I do know this - that God desires for us to ask for what we need — from God and from one another. The suffering we experience in our life can lead us to be willing to accept help from others; which is how God wants us to live — interdependent; not fiercely independent. I don't know why we can't learn lessons of wisdom and kindness and compassion without suffering, but I do know this: that often it is when we go through hard things that our hearts are open to others and we can learn about God and each other in ways that we aren't open to when life is going well or when we're pretending it's going well. I don't know why this world holds such evil and heartbreak in it and I would change it all if I could. And I know that it is often when we experience those things that God is able to open our eyes and help us realize that we've been trusting in all the wrong things to bring life and happiness and purpose. May we be courageous enough to name what we need and to ask for it. And may we as a community en-courage each other to take that risk and to grow in our relationship

with God. When we show up to one another and to God, God can and will do amazing things.