

Holy Action

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher in the Lenten series
“Listen: Hearing that Still, Small Voice and Finding Your Own”
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Mark 5:24-34 (Good News Translation) ²⁴ Then Jesus started off with him. So many people were going along with Jesus that they were crowding him from every side. ²⁵ There was a woman who had suffered terribly from severe bleeding for twelve years, ²⁶ even though she had been treated by many doctors. She had spent all her money, but instead of getting better she got worse all the time. ²⁷ She had heard about Jesus, so she came in the crowd behind him, ²⁸ saying to herself, “If I just touch his clothes, I will get well.” ²⁹ She touched his cloak, and her bleeding stopped at once; and she had the feeling inside herself that she was healed of her trouble. ³⁰ At once Jesus knew that power had gone out of him, so he turned around in the crowd and asked, “Who touched my clothes?” ³¹ His disciples answered, “You see how the people are crowding you; why do you ask who touched you?” ³² But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. ³³ The woman realized what had happened to her, so she came, trembling with fear, knelt at his feet, and told him the whole truth. ³⁴ Jesus said to her, “My daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your trouble.”
- Romans 8:25 (New Revised Standard Version) Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Sometimes prayers are expressed best not through words but through actions.

Just about everyone engages in prayer. Some pray only occasionally, such as when they're in a desperate circumstance. Others pray quite regularly, perhaps as a routine for starting or ending the day, or at mealtime, or while at church. In my experience, many people are quite self-conscious about prayer. They say, “I don't do it well,” or “I don't know what to say,” or “I'm not sure I do it right.” Are you one of those people who thinks that everyone else is a good “pray-er” and you're not?

On his long-running radio program “A Prairie Home Companion,” Garrison Keillor often told stories dealing with prayer. One story was about the pastor of the Lutheran church there in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, “the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve.” One Sunday the pastor announced that, beginning the next week, he would be instituting a new practice: at random he would call on any member of the church to offer a closing prayer at the end of the service. In the weeks that followed, the minister noted how, as the end of the service drew near, many heads were bowed. Perhaps they were deep in prayer, or perhaps they were bowed in hopes that a lack of eye contact would save them from being called upon. Lutherans, like Presbyterians, can be shy about praying in front of others.

I think today's gospel lesson is a story about prayer, though the passage doesn't really contain words of prayer. The story is familiar to many of us – the story of Jesus healing a woman who had suffered from a bleeding disorder for many years. Her condition had grown worse across the years, even though she had consulted with many physicians, spending all she had in the process. But, says Mark's gospel, she heard about Jesus. Whatever she heard about Jesus gave her hope. And, he was passing through her town. That explained the big crowd heading

down the road toward her – the teacher, his disciples, other men and women pressing in upon him trying to hear what he was saying as he walked.

“If only I can get close to him,” she thought. “If I can touch even just his clothes, even just the hem of his cloak, I know I will get well.” As the entourage passed by, the woman stepped into the road and slipped in among the crowd trailing Jesus. Slowly she worked her way forward through the crowd. With Jesus within arm’s reach she stretched out her arm, her fingers brushing against the sleeve of Jesus’ robe. Mark’s gospel says that somehow she knew at that moment that her health disorder had been healed, the bleeding had stopped. Mark adds, “... and she had the feeling inside herself that she was healed of her trouble.” After all, her physical ailment probably wasn’t the only trouble she was dealing with. I mean, don’t we contend with numerous troubles simultaneously, whether they be health matters or relationship problems or employment issues or concerns about politics or society or finances or other concerns?

That’s part one of the story – the woman was healed. Until this week I think I’ve had the wrong impression about part two of the story. Mark writes that “At once Jesus knew that power had gone out of him, so he turned around in the crowd and asked, ‘Who touched my clothes?’” I don’t know why, but for some reason I had always heard Jesus asking that in an indignant voice, as if he were angry that someone had invaded his physical space, as if he was aware that someone had taken something from him.

But now I hear him asking that in a voice of concern: “Who touched my clothes?” He’s concerned for the person who needed his care, his touch, his healing. His power is not diminished because some of it heals the woman. The woman identifies herself to him. She tells him of her trust in his healing power and her certainty that even touching his garment would connect her with him. Jesus responds, “My daughter [he immediately makes her part of his “family”], your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your trouble.” Remember, her health problem had already been healed; now Jesus promises that her other “trouble” is healed as well.

What I want you to notice is that this woman’s prayer wasn’t dependent upon words; her prayer was embodied by an action – in her case, the action of reaching out. Sometimes prayers are expressed best not through words but through actions. Think of other examples in the Bible of prayers that take the form of actions, not words:

- A woman expressed her devotion to Jesus not through words but by anointing him with costly perfume; in fact, she never uttered a word.¹
- Peter showed his faith in Jesus not through words but by following Jesus’ invitation to step out of a boat onto the waters of the Sea of Galilee.²
- The father of the “prodigal son” expressed his thankfulness to God for his son’s return not through words but by throwing a joyful, lavish party.³

Sometimes our prayers are best expressed not through words but through actions. One Bible scholar describes such praying – through actions that “humbly trust God” – as a way “to pray God’s future into the present.”⁴

Remember, in Mark’s story the woman didn’t know how to approach Jesus... what to say... what to ask for. But she was open to the “still, small voice” of God helping her in her weakness, helping her in what she needed. She allowed God’s Holy Spirit to embrace her, to

¹ Mark 14:3-9

² Matthew 14:22-33

³ Luke 15:11-32

⁴ New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. X. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002, p. 598b

guide her, to propel her to seek out Jesus. Without first saying anything to Jesus, without asking for healing, she simply placed her trust in him. Her trust was signified by the simple gesture of touching the hem of his garment. Her prayer was not offered in words but in an act, in commitment.

Aren't there times in each of our lives where we cannot find the words to pray, to ask, to express even to God our greatest concerns and our deepest longings? Yet even when words of prayer either *don't* come to us or they *do* but they seem insufficient, we are not cut off from God. The apostle Paul puts it this way: that God "searches the heart, knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints [i.e., for you and me] according to the will of God."⁵ Sometimes words aren't even necessary – God's Spirit encourages us to act as though what we would pray for is already reality.

What might that look like for us? How might the Spirit lead us to act on the prayerful desires that fill our hearts?

- Your prayers for the vitality of our church's ministry and fellowship might take the form of you acting to put yourself forward to the nominating committee as a potential deacon or elder.
- In today's society where students in some settings struggle just to stay in school, much less achieve academic progress, your prayers might take the form of you acting to volunteer as a tutor, perhaps in a school in Cleveland or Lorain.
- Your prayers for the healing of a neighbor or a church friend might take the form of you showing up on their doorstep with a meal to spare them the trouble and to provide them with nourishment.
- Your prayers for the welfare of the many people who are still reeling from the devastation wrought by hurricanes or wildfires or other disasters might take the form of you acting to join a work team headed to Louisiana or Florida. (By the way, if you think you're too old for that, my mother joined with other 70- and 80-year-olds from her church to head to Louisiana. While most of them couldn't help directly with the rebuilding of churches and homes devastated by recent hurricanes, what they did was served as cooks at one of the churches hosting these work groups. For a week they prepared breakfast, lunch and dinner for the adults and youth on the work crews.
- Maybe your prayer for war-torn regions of the world takes the form of acting to get involved with local organizations helping refugees settle in the northeast Ohio.

As the woman who touched the garment of Jesus teaches us, sometimes our prayers are best expressed not through words but through actions. "The mechanics of *what* happens in prayer isn't as important as *that* we do it."⁶ Our prayers may take the form of words we speak or think or write, or our prayers may put into action what we hope for. Regardless of the form our prayers may take, they attune us to listening for the guidance, the comfort, the healing, the forgiveness that comes from the still, small voice of God.

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⁵ Romans 8:26 New Revised Standard Version

⁶ Quoted from materials in the "Listen" worship series from Worship Design Studio at WorshipDesignStudio.com