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Mark 5:21-34

“Contagious”

When I was in kindergarten, my classmates and I were aware of something that was very contagious. I never learned much about it. I just knew it was important to avoid it at all costs. It was called cooties and it was passed from boys to girls or girls to boys by physical contact.

Much like the Coronavirus, we were able to “immunize” one another from cooties by administering a cooties shot. One person would administer the shot by taking a finger to trace circles and dots on another person’s arm while reciting the rhyme, “Circle, circle, dot, dot – now you’ve got the cootie shot.”

In some cases, the child might take it up a notch saying, “Circle, circle, square, square – now you have it everywhere.” In which case, the immunization takes hold over the entire body. It might continue to a final shot in which the child says, “Circle, circle, knife, knife – now you’ve got it all your life.” I started avoiding contact with girls during the cooties scare of 1971.

I share this with you, not because I think you were wondering about my elementary school experience, but because our Gospel reading today hinges on fear of contamination through physical contact. If you think our efforts to avoid contact with one another this last year and a half has been extreme, consider what it was like in first century Palestine.

Life among Jewish people was largely defined by a sophisticated set of purity codes. There were certain situations, certain foods, and certain people to be avoided, less they render one impure or unclean. People with leprosy were quarantined on the edge of town. If someone came near, they were required to ring a bell or shout, “Unclean, unclean!” Women, at the time of their menstrual cycle, were not to be touched. Blood rendered a person impure.

In the innermost sanctuary of the Temple in Jerusalem was a place called the Holy of Holies. This was where the Ark of the Covenant was placed which is said to have contained the Ten Commandments. The only time the Holy of Holies could be entered was

on Yom Kippur and the only person that could enter was the High Priest. That's how serious ancient Jewish people were about protecting the holy from contamination.

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is a good example. A man is beaten, robbed, and left to die on the side of the road. A priest and rabbi walk by without helping the person. The Samaritan stopped and cared for the man. It wasn't that the priest and rabbi were in a hurry or that they lacked compassion. The point is that if they touched blood or a dead person, they would be made ritually impure. That parable was a direct attack against the purity codes.

In our reading today, a man named Jairus drops to his knees and begs Jesus to come and lay his hands on his dying 12-year-old daughter. The laying on of hands represented healing. Jesus agreed to go and tend to the young woman.

On the way to the man's home, there was a crisis in the making. A woman who had been hemorrhaging or bleeding for 12 years heard about the power of Jesus. She spent all her money on doctors who did nothing for her. She was desperate. She believed if she could merely touch the hem of his garment, she would be healed.

What's not written in the text but what is clearly all over the text is that, at that moment, the kingdom of God was at risk. A woman was not supposed to approach a rabbi in the street. On top of that, if this impure/unclean woman were to touch Jesus, it was believed he would be contaminated.

This woman in our story believed in her heart that Jesus could heal her. The Jewish purity codes told her to keep her distance. The religious customs told her to keep her distance. The crowd expected her to keep her distance, but something inside of her said, "I can't keep my distance. If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well."

After pushing through the crowd, she was able to place a hand on him. Here's the crux of the story. Immediately, Jesus became aware that power had gone forth from him. Did you catch that? Her impurity didn't get passed to Jesus. She didn't defile his holiness. His holiness passed to her and healed her of her condition.

Theologian Walter Wink wrote, "In contrast to the traditional view that uncleanness was contagious, Jesus regarded holiness/wholeness as contagious." He writes, "[God's holiness] does not need to be shut up and quarantined in the Temple; it is now, through

Jesus' healings and fellowship with the despised and rejected, breaking out into the world to transform it."

I love this idea that God's holiness can't be contaminated. God's holiness is a cleansing and healing agent. Think about when you wash your hands with soap. Your hands might be full of all kinds of dirt and bacteria or maybe a virus. When you wash your hands, you don't have to worry about contaminating the soap. The soap cleanses your hands. For Jesus, holiness is like the soap.

God's holiness was transforming everything Jesus touched. It transformed faltering disciples into bold witnesses. It healed the sick. It made the blind see and the lame walk. That same holiness transformed the early church. The church would break down the wall of separation that divided Jewish disciples and supposedly "impure" Gentiles. It brought about racial reconciliation.

There are lots of things that are contagious. Covid-19 is contagious. The common cold is contagious. But holiness is also contagious. The question is how do you get infected? I want to suggest it only happens through contact. That's why Jairus asked Jesus to lay hands on his dying daughter. That's why the woman knew in her heart that she had to touch Jesus. Holiness is contagious but you have to make contact with the holy.

The woman in our story looked at Jesus and said, "I'm going to get as close to him as I possibly can. I want what he has." Maybe that's where healing begins. Maybe it begins the moment we decide observing Jesus from a distance isn't enough. Therefore, we come into worship ready to experience the holy. We pray to Jesus. We try to emulate Jesus. We try to be Christlike in how we treat other people. We serve and participate in the community of faith, because holiness is contagious, but we can only get through direct contact.

I'll say briefly, I think Mark intentionally drew a contrast between the healing of the 12-year-old girl and the woman. Jairus was a man of power and position. Therefore, he had easy access to Jesus. The woman occupied the lowest rung on the social ladder. She would have to take an enormous risk, break every rule, and muster tremendous courage in order to be healed.

And I think it's simply our task to make sure that God's holiness continues to break out into the world. The daughter of Jairus needed Jesus, but so did the hemorrhaging woman. We all need healing and renewal. It's our task to get infected with holiness and go

the people on the margins, the poor and forgotten. It's our task to make it easy for them to encounter Christ.

Some of you may be wondering if, somewhere along the way, you've contracted holiness. The symptoms are very recognizable. They include feeling connected or feeling part of something larger than oneself. Another symptom is sudden and inexplicable trust in God, what we might call peace. Another symptom is openness and compassion for the "other," accompanied by irritability at injustice and suffering. Other symptoms include the urge to be extremely generous, grateful, joyful, and courageous in the face of intimidating circumstances.

There's one last thing you need to know. There is no vaccine against holiness. A mask can't protect you. Nobody can make circles and dots on your arm, recite a rhyme, and grant you immunity.

If you've already encountered the holy, you might not be able to shake it. You may just have to spend the rest of your days proclaiming, "Friends, I've touched Jesus. I'm not the same person I used to be. I'm filled with love and peace and contentment."

And I'm highly contagious.