

Homily on Mark 5: 24-34

Father David I. Giffen

I speak to you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

In the corner of a room, a woman stands alone; her face grimacing with pain and anguish. Her stance is crooked and the walls hold her up – as she breathes in and out with the most deliberate of breathes. The grey in her hair, and the lines on her face, make you think of someone aged – but the light in her eyes has not been put out, and you wonder, what could have happened to make her this way.

Is it cancer from which she suffers, or another treacherous disease? Is it the loss of a spouse that makes her cry, or the death of child which strikes her with grief? She reminds you of a mother, of a sister, or a spouse – she reminds you of someone you've loved. And alone she stands in a room with no comfort, unable to reach out, and ask for what she needs.

We live in a world strange world; a world which encourages us to hide our personal struggles, and our private battles, as though they were something to be ashamed of. I can't even begin to describe for you, the number of people I meet in ministry, who need to speak with me, about how alone they feel in this world. Sure, they work alongside others, and they pass people on the street – but for too many, their reality is indeed alone.

For many in the world around us, it is certainly a daily occurrence, to hide both mental and physical disease. Addictions run rampant throughout all our communities, but admit to it, and see how quiet a room gets. We ascribe to a faith which proclaims all are welcome, that none should be alone – but try being a 17 year old girl who has had an abortion, and see how welcome, you feel inside church walls.

For one reason or another, somewhere along the way, our society has bought into a system, which prefers us to portray a facade of strength, rather than a reality of weakness – a system which encourages isolation, to save the face of shame.

The suffering woman in this morning's gospel is one of the most courageous figures in scripture. The haemorrhaging, from which she suffered, was considered a disease, by which Jewish law required her to keep isolation. Coming within any proximity of another person was not permitted by law, never mind actually touching.

Her world said, 'hide, and stay out sight – we don't want your kind around.'

But this suffering woman came to hear of a preacher, a man with extraordinary gifts. She heard of Jesus and the power he had, to transform all those around him. And from the depth of her sorrows and the misery of 12 long years – this woman braved out into the world, to find this preacher from Galilee.

She knew the law. She knew it was not allowed. But no more was she willing to suffer. If this Jesus could heal her, if he could take away her pain, then she would have the courage to face the world. No longer would she accept loneliness and despair, as the only options for her future.

No longer would she be content to continue on in such misery; she would seek out healing and wellness for herself. She would violate her imposed isolation; she would buck the system, society put in place, and with an out stretched arm she would break through the crowd, reaching out, and touching Jesus.

The gift of human touch is a gift God has given us, to shelter, foster, and create life. The absence of this gift from our lives can be as painful as the absence of food, water, or warmth.

It's not uncommon for someone who lives alone, to go weeks, without ever being touched – to go weeks, without tactile evidence of care. Hundreds of children in our companion diocese of Mthatha, go days without ever being embraced – never learning the touch which tells them that they are loved. The absence of a spouse through death, and through divorce, leaves a void where touch was once their comfort.

The gift of touch *is more* than a just a symbolic gesture, or a representation of care. Touch is the very means by which we connect to one another in both happiness and despair. Touch is how a mother bonds with her child in the infant days after birth. Touch is how I know my dog missed me, when I come home and he licks my face. Touch is how love is shared throughout each day of marriage. Touch is how we say goodbye as the sick are anointed in death.

But for those, like the suffering woman from the gospel, who have found themselves forced into isolation – the idea of connection, the notion of touch, takes immense amounts of courage to consider. Braving out into a world which has encouraged us to hide our personal struggles, and shelter our battles only known to ourselves; sharing with another human being, the things we are most ashamed of, and the things that make us most afraid.

Allowing another person to hear our story; allowing another person to pick up and carry our cross.

Too many times have I heard the saying that we all **must** carry the crosses we are asked to bear – as if God desires us to suffer the cross of disease, of divorce, of loss, of guilt, of addiction, or of shame? One of the hardest,

but most important things we can ever do as professing Christians – is to believe with our hearts, and show with our lives, that God has loved us, and that God has forgiven us – that He has redeemed us, and taken our shame.

The woman from the gospel had carried her cross for one too many days. Her desire for connection and healing broke through the fear from isolation and disgrace. She came to experience faith as both a verb and an action, touching Jesus, and asking him to take away her pain.

Christ offers to carry any cross that we can carry; He offers to take upon him our pain. No matter how alone you might be, or how long it has been since you've believed. No matter what you have done, or far you strayed – our God loves us, and He calls us by name.

My brothers and sisters, **you** are the Body of Christ; **you** are God's presence in God's world. You are Christ's arms, Christ's eyes, Christ's ears, and Christ's hands. You are the comfort, and the touch that so many need. The world teaches us to hide and to be afraid – But you stand out and proclaim love always.

Our God listens to our struggles and takes away our shame. Our God lifts us from our battles, and carries us until we can walk again. There is no disease we need hide from him; there is no secret which he can't hear.

For whenever we hurt, and whenever we struggle, whenever we cry, or pain, we follow the woman from scripture today, we admire, and live with her courage. We reach out and touch the cloak of Christ; we reach out to come to God – For without hesitation he always turns to us, and with love he always says,

'Peace, I am with you; come to me, and I will make you well.'

Thanks be to God