

Measureless Love
Ethel Hornbeck
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Mark 5:21-43

We are, it seems, infatuated with power these days--everywhere you turn: humvees, missiles, armies... transformers, phasers, and wizards. We cultivate physical strength, seek after wealth, health and beauty—attributes that confer *power over* another-- a nation, a person, a situation ...power over that creates a sense security, well being, control.

There is a very different kind of power at work in our story today with a very different dynamic. Jesus is just back from a flashy exorcism on the Gentile side of the sea, and he's pursued by a huge crowd, following and pressing in on him. In this mass of people, a woman severely afflicted with some chronic bleeding disease, makes her way through the crowd, approaches him from behind, and covertly reaches out to claim his healing power. "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well" (the word here is actually **saved**) and "immediately, her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately, aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said 'who touched my clothes?'"

Power—the Greek *dynamis*—is a central concept throughout the New Testament, especially Matthew, Mark and Luke-Acts, and Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. As is so often the case with translation, we lose some of its *power* in the variety of words with which it is translated--most often "power" but sometimes also "miracle" even "meaning." Although *dynamis* *can* be used in reference to the power of armies and wealth, in these stories, it is inextricably linked to Spirit, God's presence in the world, and the coming of the upside-down kingdom.

Dynamis is also closely linked with Jesus, but its not so much an attribute that he possesses, as it is a force that flows through him like electricity flows through wires. In this story, healing power flows from and through Jesus *without* his conscious intent. It is the woman's touch of faith that summons forth the great healing power working through Jesus. And, just a few verses later, this power has almost ceased to flow in response to the skepticism and cynicism of a disbelieving hometown crowd: "*Who do you think you are, carpenter's son?*" And so, we read: "He could do no deed of power there and was amazed at their unbelief."

There is yet another manifestation of power at work in our story today, the power flowing through the wounded woman. We are told in great detail of her suffering in body, mind and spirit, her financial destitution, and her isolation. She's been afflicted by hemorrhages for twelve long years, a condition that would have made her religiously unclean and in all likelihood, isolated her permanently from participation in her community. She enters the crowd alone, in contrast to the father Jairus frantically seeking healing on behalf of his daughter. It would be hard to imagine a lowlier, lonelier, more powerless creature than this woman.

"One of the most extraordinary features of her story," writes theologian Frances Taylor Gensch, is that "her healing occurs at her own initiative. She does not request healing. Instead she violates social codes and perhaps even religious law to claim healing for herself, without permission from anyone—without even the compliance of Jesus." Despite, or perhaps because of her situation, she is bold, insistent, propelled by some powerful life force, drawing her toward healing and wholeness. That power flows through her and draws forth the power flowing through Jesus. No wonder Jesus pauses--in mid-mission on behalf of a leading member

of the ruling elite--just to find this woman and hear her story. He listens and responds: "Daughter, your faith has made you well" -- again the word is "saved"-- "your faith has saved you, go in peace, and be healed of your disease." Her salvation begins with her faith, leads to healing and peace, and is sealed by restoration to full community as Jesus' own daughter and her full, life-creating capacity as a woman.

Now, this is not some propositional faith. She does not recite for Jesus the Apostles Creed or the Westminster Shorter Catechism in order to gain his favor. Her faith is primal and embodied -- it reaches out with a prophetic hope, a bold rebuke of despair, a foundational belief in Goodness at work in the world, and a conviction of her own essential worth and power. Jesus *experiences* that power and even as he empowers her claim to new life he is, in turn, inspired by her.

This story depicts, according one commentator, "a Christology of shared spiritual power, one in which Jesus' power is active through the participation of others." Clearly not the power of armies or wizards, even good ones, not a power that coerces, not a *power over* anything, but a *power with* the Spirit, that is shared with all who claim it, the mysterious but invincible power of self-giving love, one that heals, restores, and invites our full participation in the ongoing work creation.

According to an ancient formula, Jesus is "fully human and fully divine". Too much focus on the latter has tended to obscure the former, to the great detriment of Christian faith over the centuries. Furthermore, contemporary theologians suggest that this may be less a list of attributes, and more a *dynamic*--Jesus *becomes* fully divine by becoming fully human, a dynamic present in each and every human life, at least in the mode of offer. Jesus shows us not just what God is like, but also what human being is really meant to be and capable of becoming. As the second century theologian Irenaeus put it, "Christ, in his measureless love, became what we are, in order that we might become what he is." This movement toward "divinization" was the essential understanding of "salvation" long, long before the strange, terrifying and *powerful* notions of fiery flames and an angry God demanding blood sacrifice that emerge in the dark and chaotic middle ages.

There is a power at work in our world and in our lives today, one that we have all experienced even if we have not named it or fully claimed it. It is mysterious, elusive and far more powerful than all the armies of the earth. It is quiet, but never passive, perseveres but will not coerce. The power of measureless love is around us, among us, and within us, calling us to participate in healing and wholeness in each and every day, in each and every circumstance of our lives.

"Our deepest fear", writes Marianne Williamson, "is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. And as we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

So pay attention. Listen to your life. There is a power at work, and an invitation unfolding in your heart, in your imagination, in your experience right here and right now. Some kind of invitation to healing, reconciliation, to participate in the re-creation of self and world, one step, one touch, one prayer, one smile, one act of kindness at a time. But its just an invitation... what then will *we* do?