

*Holy Gumption*  
*Questions of the Congregation Series*  
*I'd Love to Hear a Sermon about:*  
Unnamed Women of the Bible

by  
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Matthew 9:18-26

<sup>18</sup> While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." <sup>19</sup> And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. <sup>20</sup> Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, <sup>21</sup> for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." <sup>22</sup> Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. <sup>23</sup> When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, <sup>24</sup> he said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. <sup>25</sup> But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. <sup>26</sup> And the report of this spread throughout that district.

As we continue our summer study of the gospel of Matthew, I am struck again by how extraordinary this time is. I dream of returning to "normal" life--when I can see our youth in person or greet people with a hug when I can go out to dinner with my wife or meet a friend for drinks. God, I miss my old normal. I imagine it may be the same for you. You too may be longing for a time when life felt less terrifying, less hectic and unsure, less confusing, and heartbreaking.

In the middle of a pandemic, we're in the middle of another civil rights movement, the middle of an election year where our country has maybe never been more divided. We're in it, friends. This time will be written about in history books. Students will write Ph.D. papers dissecting what exactly is happening right now, with the hope that hindsight can bring clarity.

In our passage today from Matthew 9, we read of a synagogue leader coming to Jesus, falling to his knees to beg Jesus to heal his daughter, to bring her back to life. This action is a bold move for a synagogue leader—going to the man whom so many of his comrades detest, in hopes that Jesus can save the life of his daughter. He comes to Jesus, and he says, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." Jesus gets up from the teaching the disciples of John and follows this synagogue leader, to go and heal his daughter.

Imagine the hope that the synagogue leader clung to in that moment. Imagine the flare of possibility, that maybe, his darling daughter would live, that she would be okay. It was absolutely "normal" for children to not live past five in this time—"nearly half the children in Jesus day did not live past the age of five" (*Feasting on the Word*, Guy D. Nave Jr.) The synagogue leader had to know it was a possibility when she was born—that he might outlive her. Imagine the hope that the leader must have suddenly felt.

But then, as they go to the leader's house to heal the daughter, something happens. Something happens that stops Jesus in his tracks. I wonder how the synagogue leader felt at that moment when he turned around, and suddenly Jesus wasn't behind him anymore, following him to save his daughter. I wonder if the leader felt betrayed, felt angry that Jesus seemingly forgot about healing his daughter. Jesus had been coming – he had been following – he was going to heal his daughter – and now he's distracted by this dirty old woman!? How dare she distract Jesus from the critical mission of healing his daughter!

And we have this unnamed woman—a woman who has been bleeding, the feminine way, for 12 years—seen as ritually unclean by her community for 12 years. In this same story in Mark 5, we read that she has spent all of her money on doctors and potential cures for her continuous bleeding. She has used every possible option, all of her financial resources and energy seeking treatment, only to continue bleeding for 12 years. She has been ostracized and likely judged by her community, as though she might somehow "deserve" her illness, that it's her fault for a sin she committed, or a sin her parents committed. Her bleeding was not their problem. And they had been told, forever, that she was dirty, was unclean, unworthy. And as a synagogue leader, this man, called Jairus on the Markan text, would have likely upheld those choices, even encouraged her exclusion from the community.

According to Levitical law, when someone unclean like her touched someone else, their impurity would spread to the other person. When this woman touches Jesus or anyone else in the crowd of people following him, she would have made them ritualistically unclean.

And Jairus, as a Jewish leader, would have seen her as such. As a synagogue official, upheld the laws about her impurity. He thought it was the right choice to uphold the laws of the time that made him an insider and her, an outsider.

But, this brave, bold, resilient, determined woman (who I see as the hero of this story) says to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." She has been bleeding for 12 years. 12 years. Her "normal" life was alienation; her "normal" was begging for scraps; her "normal" was being judged as unclean, dirty, as worthless.

By the grace of God, *this woman knows in her very bones* that all the lies she's been told about herself are untrue. That she is deserving, that she does matter, that she is worthy of belonging. She has the Holy Gumption to reach out herself and touch the cloak of Jesus, confident that such contact will heal her.

Jesus turns around. He sees her. I imagine he smiles, looking her in the eye, and says, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well."

Jesus, on the way to healing Jairus' daughter, calls *this* older woman *daughter*.

There's a correlation between this woman and the official's daughter. That both, even though both are females, often seen as property, even though they are sick and unclean, that both are beloved and seen by Jesus. He sees both of them as worthy of his attention and care. He stops on the way to healing the girl more closely affiliated with power, to heal the woman less connected to power. Because that woman, through her actions, demanded to be healed.

Jesus then turns back around and follows Jairus to his house to find mourners already outside. They mock Jesus for thinking the girl is merely asleep. Jesus goes into the house, he takes her hand, and the girl gets up. Jairus's *daughter* is healed. I imagine him falling to the ground in gratitude, weeping as he holds his child to his chest, amazed that he hasn't lost her forever. That he, who had been a father without a child, has his child returned to him.

From the end of this passage, one could assume that Jairus may go back to "normal" life. But, for the hemorrhaging woman, who Jesus healed, her life would never be the same, her normal would never be the same.

I used to deeply identify with the unnamed woman, who desperately longed for Jesus, for healing, for acceptance. But, looking at this story now, I don't know if I can claim her anymore.

Looking at my life now, I can't help but realize I have much more in common with the synagogue leader – the man in power, impatient for *his* daughter to be healed.

For the most part, I exist in a system where I am accepted. The color of my skin has never been a boundary for my success. In so many ways, I was born on third base. I was born into an upper middle class household where neither parent was taken away by death, circumstance, or mistake. I had access to an excellent education, and I got it. I graduated from college with zero debt because my parents helped me find enough scholarships to pay for my private college education. For the most part, my body has taken care of me pretty well, with only a few moments in crutches. I've still never broken a bone. I've never had to worry about my next meal, whether or not I could pay for it. I've very rarely worried about paying for medications or healthcare, physical or mental. To my knowledge, my parents never

had to choose between taking me to the doctor or paying the electricity bill. I grew up and saw leaders in religion and school and government who had my same skin color. I watched movies and tv shows and read books where people who looked like me were the protagonist. And in terms of a safety net, I could go to my parent's house right now and know that I would be taken care of. And, thanks to the work of liberators before me, I was able to get married. And the only people at the wedding were folks who I knew loved and supported us. And now I have a job I love, where I still look like most everybody else.

When I read this story, I can't help but see myself as the synagogue leader, the official. The person who had a nice “normal” and just wants it back. The person who was complicit in the oppression of the unnamed woman.

And looking at the world now--overrun by a pandemic, protests against police brutality, and a severely divided country-- I can't help but see Black, Indigenous, and People of Color folks as the resilient, brave, possessors of holy gumption who demand to be healed too. In this moment, they are the people who remind us that what I knew as “normal,” was not a safe or just “normal” for everyone.

Black poet, activist, author, and leader, Sonya Renee Taylor, recently said, "We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction... we should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature" – Sonya Renee Taylor

We people of privilege have ignored the cries of our suffering siblings for centuries. Just like the hemorrhaging woman who tried for 12 years to find healing, our Black, Indigenous, and People of Color siblings have tried every way to communicate their suffering. They have reminded us over and over that the oppression they experience is unjust, immoral, sinful. And I have not listened.

And as our oppressed siblings reach out for the hem of Jesus' cloak, I want to be someone who will, rather than reacting with fear and anger and defensiveness, will stop, will *see*. I want to be someone who will listen and trust Jesus to heal my daughter and rejoice when I see those who have suffered far longer getting healed, too.

Jesus enacts a miracle in that moment of her healing. He not only heals her suffering, but he heals the community that had alienated her. He brings her back into society, where the community can finally appreciate her worth and brilliance, where they can finally see and experience all that she has to offer. Through healing her, Jesus heals the community so she can take part in the life of the people, making it look more like the Kingdom of God by her very presence.

Peruvian Theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, a founder of Liberation Theology, once said that the oppressed person "does not exist as an inescapable fact of destiny. [Their] existence is not politically neutral, and it is not ethically innocent. The poor are a by-product of the system in which we live and for which we are responsible. They are marginalized by our social and cultural world. ...Hence the poverty of the poor is not a call to generous relief action, but a demand that we go and build a different social order."

When looking at our current fractured and suffering world, we must remember that God is always on the side of the oppressed, which means that we are called to be at the side of the oppressed.

When I find myself longing for my old "normal" life during this wild time, I realize now I do not, I cannot want to go back. Our current time of uncertainty and anxiety invites us to creatively re-imagine how we could live a more just and merciful society.

Growing up, I'm sure we all learned about caterpillars and butterflies. You might not have learned about what is called "imaginal cells" that caterpillars are born with that form the blueprint, inside a caterpillar, of what they can become. Before a caterpillar turns into a butterfly, the caterpillar spins a cocoon. In that cocoon, their whole body transforms. These imaginal cells hold the framework for all the adult parts of a butterfly—wings, antennae, eyes, legs, the entire butterfly. And it is only within the cocoon when the caterpillar has become this soupy mess inside the chrysalis that these imaginal cells are activated. They fuel a rapid cell division that results in the emerging of a butterfly.

Just like the butterfly – God created us with imagination, with the imaginal cells to participate in and co-create God's KIN-dom of justice, mercy and peace.

We are invited in this time of forced reflection to imagine, to dream up together with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color a more just world, to dream up together a new normal. God invites us to take part, listen, learn, make mistakes, be corrected, be convicted, and see the beauty of all of God's good creation. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus summons us to be co-creators in that new social order. He bids us see the bleeding woman as the hero of the story, full of the holy gumption that she is worthy of love and belonging.

Amen

May God our Creator bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart.

May Jesus, our brother, bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May the Holy Spirit, bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you may reach out your hand to walk alongside them.

And may God—Creator, Liberator and Sustainer—bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, that you can take part in creating a new normal, where all God's children are treated as representatives of God's very being.

Amen.