

# WHO TOUCHED ME?

## *SERIES: QUESTIONS JESUS ASKED*

By Steve Zeisler

On July 19, 1848, exactly 150 years ago today, a convention of women and men, most of whom had worked together in the movement to abolish slavery, ratified the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions. This declaration deliberately used the language of the Declaration of Independence in its insistence that all men and women were created equal. The convention and this declaration were the beginning of a 70-year campaign to secure for women the right to vote in this country, and it is hailed as the beginning of modern feminism.

The desire for significance and respect is God-given. Men and women are made in God's image, created to lead lives of dignity and purpose.

However, those who celebrate the Seneca Falls convention of 1848 do not go back far enough in history in seeking to renew a commitment to the dignity of all persons. Despite the fact that Christian teaching and practice have often been accused of undermining women, in reality it is Jesus Christ who gives meaning and worth to every life, to women and men alike.

### THE SUFFERING OF UNCLEANNES

This sermon series focuses on questions Jesus asked. The question in this message is "Who touched me?" It is answered by a woman in desperate circumstances stemming from a physical malady unique to women.

The background for this story is from the Old Testament, Leviticus 15:25: "When a woman has a discharge of blood for many days at a time other than her monthly period or has a discharge that continues beyond her period, she will be unclean as long as she has the discharge, just as in the days of her period." This was the condition of the woman before us. We will discover that she had lived for twelve years with a menstrual flow that could not be ended. And because of the Levitical laws to which she was subject as a Jew living among Jews, it had many repercussions beyond just the medical condition.

Time doesn't permit discussion of all the Old Testament laws regarding uncleanness and the reasons for them. Why certain times, places, conditions, and circumstances rendered someone unclean would require lengthy exposition. But briefly, we are given in the law a list of things that were unclean, among them shellfish, pork, various insects, a man's nocturnal emission, the touching of a corpse, various skin conditions, mold in the plaster of a house, and a high priest with torn clothing or a broken bone. Touching, eating, experiencing, or being near these could render a person unclean.

All of these things were created by God and blessed by him; they occur in nature and are good; there is nothing intrinsically offensive about them. But we don't learn very well about the invisible and spiritual world except by analogy, so we're given physical symbols in order to learn spiritual lessons. (Communion is an example, of course. Christians focus on the cross of Christ when they ingest a bit of bread and wine.) These laws categorizing conditions as clean or unclean for the children of Israel were meant to teach lessons of joy and sorrow, of hope and mourning, to instruct about life and death.

However, the individual consequences that occurred because of the laws of ritual uncleanness didn't descend equally on everybody. The twelve-year span of uncleanness that this woman experienced meant that she must

have lived with questions about herself: "What is it about me that makes me the object of such unending struggle? Where is God, and why doesn't he answer my prayers? Why am I forced away from him, forbidden to go into the temple for refreshment of public worship?" She was isolated from people, too. Others would stay away to avoid ritual contamination.

Let's read Mark 5:21-23:

**When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. Then one of the synagogue rulers, named Jairus, came there. Seeing Jesus, he fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live."**

This account begins with an appeal by a man of high station. A large crowd surrounded Jesus, an important rabbi, as he heard the appeal of Jairus and responded with compassion. They hurried off as quickly as the crowd would permit—important men on an urgent mission.

Then there was an interruption. A woman's story intervened. Verses 24-34:

**So Jesus went with him.**

**A large crowd followed and pressed around him. And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.**

**At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"**

**"You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'"**

**But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."**

The word "healed" in verses 28 and 34 is the Greek word *sozo*. It means healing in the ordinary sense in which medicine and doctors and processes of nature will heal illness over time. But it's also the word that is used for salvation, and we need the context to tell us which is meant in each particular case. Clearly in the first case, in verse 28, the woman hoped to be healed of a medical condition, and she felt in her body she was healed of her affliction.

The question that translators have difficulty with, though, is whether Jesus used this word the same way in verse 34: "Daughter, your faith has healed you." Or was he saying something more profound: "Daughter, your faith has *saved* you"? I propose that the latter is right, that Jesus knew the physical problem had already been dealt with, as did she, but that there was a spiritual brokenness that still required a word from him. We will return to this point.

HELP IN EXTREME SUFFERING

What should we make of the woman's difficulty? Mark gives us a good bit of detail about her struggle. First of all, she had a debilitating physical sickness. She must certainly have been anemic, weakened by the continued blood loss. She was also growing sicker and sicker. She had appealed to doctors for help, but they couldn't help her, and the condition was getting worse.

Another problem was the kind of help she would have been offered by both doctors and folk medics. Some of the cures available to her would have made things worse. Alfred Edersheim, an orthodox Jew who became a Christian, has written studies of the gospels with helpful insights about Jewish customs. He writes: "On one leaf of the Talmud [which is an ancient commentary on the Old Testament, in this case Leviticus] not less than eleven different remedies are proposed [for this problem of nonstop menstruation], of which at most only six can possibly be regarded as astringents or tonics, while the rest are merely the outcome of superstition, to which resort is had in the absence of knowledge." He notes the kinds of superstitions that this woman would have been offered as cures or help: "...The ashes of an Ostrich-Egg, carried in the summer in a linen, in winter in a cotton rag; or barley-corn found in the dung of a white she-ass, etc."1 So the help she was being offered for her affliction was not only unhelpful, but it took a toll itself.

The problems went beyond her physical suffering, however. Twelve years is a long time to be sick, and frustration builds when you go to one physician after another to the point of destitution with no good outcome. Her emotional condition must have been desperate as well.

We can also imagine that because she was unclean, she was isolated from family members who wanted to avoid contamination. There was fear of the future, certainly. Things were getting worse. What would life be like next week or the week after if she continued at this rate? Finally, she had spent all her money, so not only was she sick, but she was poor.

The man we considered in 5:1-20 lived in extreme circumstances. But the self-destructiveness of a legion of demons resided in him, the dark, howling, cutting, awful thing that his life had become was perhaps matched by this woman's condition of depression, withdrawal, and sorrow. We're meant to read this as heartbreakingly difficult. And the Savior who could help these people can help folks like us who know something of self destruction and sorrow. The Lord both loved these people and acted to free them, and he will do the same for us.

## JESUS' RESPONSE TO AN APPEAL FOR HELP

With this background, let's consider the events here from three angles. If we were directing a movie of this story, we would have the camera first follow the woman. Presumably she had heard Jesus teach or had known others whom he had healed. Somehow she decided it was worth it to try one more time, to at least get near enough to him to see if God would help her. We notice her off in the distance. The crowd was trying to rush with Jesus to Jairus' house, but a large crowd can't move very fast. She sneaked into the crowd, and finding a crack here and an opening there, finally made it near to Jesus. She was able to reach out and touch the edge of his garment. And, glorious news, for the first time in twelve years she found herself freed from her illness. The condition that had dominated her experience for so long suddenly ended.

From a second angle, we observe the crowd, specifically the disciples. Their unsolicited opinion, as was so often the case, was wrong. They had the audacity to tell the Lord to be sensible and get on with meeting the needs of the important synagogue official at his house.

There are a couple of points I would make regarding the disciples. First, we can learn to be more sensitive. It's not required that we always be completely clueless as these first disciples of Jesus were. We can learn to think as the Lord does. We can learn to expect that there are people everywhere who want him more than they are able to articulate, who are reaching out on some level for the life-restoring power of God. They don't know how to ask for help. They may not know what to say, what to do, or where to go, but they desperately want God to love them and they want the freedom to love him back. We can learn to see what's going on in people's hearts and lives. We should be more tender, more caring, more expectant, more compassionate. We're supposed to be like our Lord.

Second, the church is not the answer. Jesus is the answer. But sometimes we make efforts in our programs and activities to try to meet peoples' needs at a level where we cannot, and we will always disappoint them. The human players in the drama cannot act as the Lord can. This woman needed Jesus. Inviting people to join the community of fellow disciples is not the best thing we can do. The best thing we can do is tell them of the love of Jesus, place them in his presence, and allow them to know and experience his life directly.

The third angle of observation is to look at Jesus. It is significant that he stopped his urgent errand. There was a little girl dying and an important man tugging at his sleeve, urging him, "Come quickly!" The disciples ridiculed him. But the Lord knew that somebody needed him. He felt power go out from himself, and he knew that this appeal for help was more important than everything else at that moment. The high-status man was not preferred over the marginalized woman. Every honest cry for help receives God's full attention.

You remember the story of the one hundred sheep (Matthew 18:12; Luke 15:4). The shepherd left behind ninety-nine sheep that weren't lost so that he could find the one that needed him. Each one of us is the object of his searching love.

Jesus called for the woman to identify herself. He gave her the opportunity without insisting. Because of her condition, all of the touching as she worked her way through the crowd could have resulted in scorn and rebuke. Certainly, to approach an important rabbi and deliberately touch him, if anything had gone wrong, could have resulted in censure and hostility. Jesus wasn't going to insist that she say what had happened, but he gave her the chance to know him face-to-face.

Let me explain the basis for suggesting earlier that the word *sozo* in verse 34 should be translated "saved" rather than "healed." The woman took the initiative to approach him at first, but a saving relationship with Jesus doesn't come at our initiative. She needed to know that the Lord reached out for her-not that she was required to pursue an indifferent Messiah.

Further, her initiative was anonymous. It left her back on the outside of the crowd. No one would ever know, she wouldn't be part of a community, she wouldn't have others who had experienced salvation as her allies and friends, she wouldn't have brothers and sisters, she would always be on her own, if not for Jesus' actions.

Lastly, she needed more than just physical healing. She had a broken heart, bitterness, frustration, questions, confusion, and dark memories that had lasted for twelve years. Somebody needed to heal those as well, not just the physical malady.

So courageously, the woman took the opportunity Jesus offered her and came forward. The great act of faith in this story was not touching his robe, but falling at his feet and telling her whole story. Her story was about embarrassing, difficult, isolating things, about brokenness of heart and body. In front of Jesus and the surrounding crowd, she told it to him. This was a very difficult thing to do, especially because, as I've said, she had taken a risk to even touch him. The faith that allowed her to say, "I trust you enough that you're going to love me, not rebuke me for what I've done," was the great act of faith.

Jesus said, "Your faith has saved you." His initiative led to a face-to-face relationship with him-a renewed spirit, a healed soul, which went beyond just the physical healing that she had already experienced. Salvation granted her peace in addition to physical healing.

## RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS, NOT JUST HELP

We're at the 150th anniversary of the Seneca Falls Declaration. The best things the women's movement in western culture has done in the last 150 years have been very good: securing for women the right to vote opened doors to employment and education, giving attention to reproductive health. But none of them are ultimately liberating. It is not enough for any group to articulate areas of need and call for the culture and the laws and the institutions to change to meet them. We do not achieve peace and wholeness and healing that way. The only One who can give us what we long to have, men or women, is Jesus.

Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" He asks it still. Some in the crowd today have reached out a hand to him for help, but remained afraid to say the whole truth.

If you have a face-to-face relationship with Jesus, you're not in control anymore. You can touch his robe and then run away. But if you're in a face-to-face relationship he will call for honesty and obedience. He's going to be in charge of who you are and what you do and where you go and what you think. But as scary as it is to respond to his question "Who touched me?" it is far worse to fail to respond, to have a relationship with God that *you* are in charge of, to get only an occasional gift instead of being made whole and given peace on the inside. It's a terrible mistake to fail to answer, when he's looking intently for you, wanting to bless you.

## NOTES

1. Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus The Messiah: New Updated Edition*. © 1993 by Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., Peabody, MA. P. 426.

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