

Touching Holiness

A spiritual message given by Joy T. Barnitz at San Francisco Swedenborgian Church on Sunday, 30 June 2013

Scripture Readings

- **Daniel 10: 16 – 19**; from New Revised Standard Version

Then one in human form touched my lips, and I opened my mouth to speak, and said to the one who stood before me, "My lord, because of the vision such pains have come upon me that I retain no strength. How can my lord's servant talk with my lord? For I am shaking, no strength remains in me, and no breath is left in me." Again one in human form touched me and strengthened me. He said, "Do not fear, greatly beloved, you are safe. Be strong and courageous!" When he spoke to me, I was strengthened and said, "Let my lord speak, for you have strengthened me."

Note on Daniel - this selection comes from the Apocalyptic portion of the Book of Daniel. Part of the "Writings" portion of the Hebrew Bible, it is the only example of this literary form in the Jewish canon. Scholars think that the Book of Daniel was compiled in the 2nd century BCE, about the time of the Maccabean revolt, and may be the most recent of the Jewish canon. The first 6 chapters of Daniel, which are a collection of separate tales, were merged with a series of visions (Ch. 7-12).

-
- **Mark 5: 25 - 34**; from *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, New Revised Standard Version.

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was not better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him into the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." 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? And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?' " He looked all around

to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

Note on Gospel - this miracle story is found in all three Synoptic Gospels: Mark 5:25-34, Matthew 9:20-22 and Luke 8: 43-48. In each Gospel, this story is "sandwiched" between two parts of the story of Jairus' daughter,

-
- Swedenborg passage for the weekly bulletin - *Arcana Coelestia (Heavenly Secrets) #10130* (Elliott translation)

The reason why 'touching' means an imparting, conveying, and being received is that a person's inner feelings are expressed by outward means, in particular by touch, and are thereby imparted and conveyed to another; and insofar as the will of the other is in tune and at one with his they are received. Whether you say the will or the love, it amounts to the same thing; for whatever a person loves he likewise wills. From this it also follows that the inner feelings a person has as a result of what he loves and therefore thinks are expressed through touch, and by means of it are imparted and conveyed to another. And insofar as the other loves the person expressing those feelings or loves the things which that person says and does, those feelings are received.

Additional Swedenborg passage relevant to this NT passage- *Arcana Coelestia (Heavenly Secrets) #9917* (Elliott translation): The healing of the woman suffering from the flow of blood when she touched the hem of the Lord's garment, Matt. 9:20, 22, and in general the healing of as many as touched the hem of his garment, Matt. 14:36; Mark 6:56, was a sign that salvation went out from God as He is present on most external or lowest levels. ... Here it is plainly evident that 'the hem of the robe' means outward things which are clearly visible, and that 'enlarging it' means doing works on that level of things in order that they may be apparent or be seen - this miracle story is found in all three Synoptic Gospels: Mark 5:25-34, Matthew 9:20-22 and Luke 8: 43-48. In each Gospel, this story is "sandwiched" between two parts of the story of Jairus' daughter,

Do you believe in miracles? Have you ever felt as if you really needed one?

If you are like me, you learn best, or maybe remember best, through hearing stories. There are two common types of stories in the Gospels through which we get to know Jesus’ teachings: parables and miracle stories. Our second reading, frequently referred to as the story of “the woman with a hemorrhage” or “the woman with an issue of blood,” is an example of the miracle stories of the Gospels. And it is one of my favorites. For me, it captures the very essence of faith. It resonates with my experiences of ‘dark’ times and it reminds me that I must actually take action on my own behalf. I must reach out for healing. I must reach out for God. I must be open to the touch of the Divine.

As I prepared this talk, I found myself consulting another favorite book: James Autry’s *Looking Around for God* and I found the following gem in his chapter entitled “Preach the Whole Story (and Treat me like a Grown-Up).” This is something that I think Swedenborg’s theology does: it treats us as grown-ups. Stating that “biblical scholarship is a form of worship,” Autry says: “Jesus was saying that when the rules, the code, the law get in the way of mercy and love of one’s fellow man, then we need to reexamine those rules. ... As a Christian, I want to be treated like a grown-up. I can take it if I hear something that’s different from what I’ve been taught all my life, and I think most other grown-ups can too.” The father of an autistic son who has been an advocate for disability rights for many years, Autry advocates giving “those miracle stories a rest” saying that they don’t “do a lot for Jesus’ credibility” if you focus on “the idea of a Jesus who heals some people and not others, while professing to love everyone equally.” So let’s engage together in a bit of bible study. Let’s ask what meaning this story can have for us today.

This story is found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is noteworthy that this is the only story in all of the Gospels of a “woman who seeks from Jesus a miracle for herself.”¹ One might consider her an example of an empowered woman, although that would not have been a virtue in Jesus’ time. I selected the version from Mark’s Gospel as it is believed by scholars to be the oldest of the three and that Matthew and Luke’s versions are derived from it.

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill, *Introduction*. In *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 15

In all three Gospels, the story is sandwiched between the two parts of the story of healing Jairus’ daughter. In each Gospel, the essence of these two stories is the same. However there are small differences in the details; these differences are used by scholars to try to understand the intended audience for the Gospel and the nature of the early Christian communities which were their “target audience.” I invite you to read each Gospel’s version of the story with this in mind and see what this may reveal to you.

So what are the ‘facts’? What are the story elements that are preserved in all three versions of this story?

- (1) the woman suffered for twelve years from hemorrhages, presumably from her womb, a very “female disorder,” an illness that would make her ritually impure,
- (2) the encounter takes place in a public, outdoor, open space, where unaccompanied women are not usually found,
- (3) she has no one acting on her behalf, typically it would be a male family member interceding on her behalf as Jairus does for his daughter
- (4) she approaches Jesus from behind,
- (5) she touches Jesus’ cloak or clothes; and in Matthew and Luke the ‘fringe’ of his cloak is specified
- (4) Jesus calls her ‘daughter’
- (5) Jesus tells her that her faith has healed / saved her (the Greek word can be translated either way)
- (6) she has no name.

Traditionally, the woman’s plight is described as one that makes her ritually impure, and thus an outcast from her family and society, according to the regulations of Leviticus (Lev. 15: 25-30). Recognizing this fact, it is also good to keep in mind the observations of one scholar² who notes that “... many sermons claim, incorrectly, that by touching a woman suffering from hemorrhages ... Jesus violates purity laws or social taboos. First, Jesus does not touch the woman; she touches him. Second, hands do not convey menstrual impurity. The point of the healing is that Jesus restores a woman to health (and to ritual purity), not that impurity, which is a natural part of the world-order, is evil.”

² Levine, Amy-Jill, *Bearing False Witness: Common Errors Made About Early Judaism*. In *The Jewish Annotated New Testament, New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: NY, Oxford University Press, 2011), 502

“Purity codes are not set aside, but people are cleansed of their impurities” by Jesus’ actions³ and while “it is often assumed that this healing miracle contrasts menstrual impurity codes and Jesus’ liberation of women from them, ... it is more likely that the contrast is between sickness on one hand and miraculous healing based on faith on the other.”⁴

For me, one striking thing is that Jesus apparently has no control over his healing power! The woman is able to sneak up on Jesus from behind and “steal” her healing! She doesn’t ask! What audacity! I’m not sure I would have the courage, the “guts” to do something like this. How must she have felt to do that? A woman, alone, in a public place ... how desperate must she have been?

“Grasping at fringes” is the phrase that springs to my mind. Without hope ... if this action doesn’t work there is nothing left for her. I see her approaching very quietly, creeping up behind Jesus, tentatively reaching out her arm, her finger extended from her shaking hand, just barely brushing the fringe of Jesus’ cloak. And “immediately her hemorrhage stopped and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.”

Can you imagine how she must have felt at that moment? ... Relief? ... Awe? ... Joy? I see her as hoping to steal away as stealthily as she came; inwardly rejoicing at being healed, hoping to be alone to, as we would say today, “process” what had happened and praying that she hadn’t been noticed. However, this was not to be.

Mark’s Gospel says that Jesus was “immediately aware that power had gone forth from him,” that he **turned** and asked, “Who touched my clothes?” Can you believe this? The disciples couldn’t! They couldn’t believe that Jesus noticed a touch when he was surrounded by a large crowd of people pressing on him. Can’t you just see their faces as they wonder: how could Jesus possibly notice someone touching his clothes in this crowd?

The woman realizes she’s been found out. Our text says that she “knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling and told him the whole truth.”

³ *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* p. 63

⁴ *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* p. 70, footnote

This woman, who hoped to remain invisible, who has no name, becomes a public witness for Jesus’ healing power. In each of the three Gospels, Jesus then says: “daughter, your faith has made you well.” Jesus calls her “daughter,” a term that embraces her, and restores her not only to physical health, but also to a place within the community.

Do you believe in miracles? Have you ever felt as if you were so desperate that you were “grasping for fringes”?

In 1866, a Swedenborgian named William Bruce published a *Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*. In it Bruce notes that this miracle story is “extremely interesting, not so much from the nature of the woman’s disease, as from her confidence that so great was the healing virtue which proceeded from the person of Jesus that she had only to touch the hem of his garment to be made whole.” Bruce explains that the hem of Jesus’ garment represents the “simplest truths of faith and plainest precepts of life.” The lesson we should draw from this is that whoever “takes hold of the lowest truths of the Word, if his faith in its divinity be sincere, shall ... receive from the Lord ... saving virtue sufficient to restore him to health and bless him with happiness.”

Bruce continues, noting that the woman approached Jesus from behind which indicates that she had a “deep sense of unworthiness, ... an obscure perception of the Lord ... (and) a desire to come into his presence as the object of his love and mercy rather than of his wisdom.” She touched Jesus’ garment and was healed; she had received internally what previously she had only received externally.

Jesus **turned** to her and **saw** her. Bruce notes that “when the Scriptures speak of the Lord’s seeing any one, they spiritually mean that his wisdom or truth enters into the understanding and gives an internal perception of the good which his love had inspired.”

Through touch, the woman was healed. Touch, the sense which according to Swedenborg “properly belongs to conjugal love.”⁵ It is the sense proper to

⁵ Swedenborg, *Conjugal Love* No. 210

marriage, of people to each other, and of good with truth. It is the most intimate sense, the one that brings us closest to a loved one, and closest to God.

Do you believe in miracles?

Both of the Scripture selections read this morning are illustrations of a person reaching out for help: asking for it in the case of Daniel and literally reaching out for it in the Gospel story. And in both cases, the persons received help, they were touched by holiness. The woman with an issue of blood reaches out for the fringe of Jesus’ clothes and is healed. When Jesus turns and sees her, she receives his love internally; she can accept God’s love and wisdom for herself and act in accordance with them; she is spiritually healed. Just prior to the passage of our first reading, Daniel experienced an overwhelming vision and he is afraid; he says “because of the vision such pains have come upon me that I retain no strength.” And “the one in human form,” touches his lips again and says: “Do not fear, greatly beloved, you are safe. Be strong and courageous!” The lesson here is clear: We need Divine help to strengthen us. And we need to claim enough strength and enough courage to act “as if of ourselves” to ask for, recognize and accept the Divine help, the touch of holiness, when it comes.

When I am honest with myself, and that is a very difficult thing to be, I can recognize many times when I should have / could have asked for help from God. Rooted in my habitual behavior, I take the “acting as if of myself” part of our Swedenborgian theology too far. I “forget” to ask for help. I “forget” to do the smallest of things, the “touching the fringes of the garment” that open me up to God’s influence and love. These stories of healing touch remind me of the strength that comes from doing the smallest things of faith, of looking around for God’s presence in my life and the healing that comes from that practice.

Swedenborg says in *Heaven and Hell* (No. 360) that “the only way we can be formed for heaven is through the world.” If I accept this, I must recognize that as I go about my daily endeavors, I am surrounded by “angels-in-training.” There’s an exercise I really like that we did at the 2013 Memorial Day Retreat: identifying an angel in your life. The instructions for the exercise are really quite simple: think of someone who you recognize as angel-in-training and identify how you “know” that. At the retreat this exercise was introduced at the Friday night

welcoming gathering, with the invitation that maybe some of these angels-in-training were actually AT the retreat. As part of our closing ceremony for the retreat, some of us shared our stories of angels in our lives. As many of you know, I had surgery on my left foot at the end of April and am only just now getting back “on my feet” and able to wear “normal” shoes. All through the weekend, I was helped by other participants in ways that were just-in-time, respectful, caring. I was surrounded by angels-in-training. And in seeing them as angels, I realized that I was experiencing a miracle: that if I just looked I could see the angels-in-training all around me.

So yes, I believe in miracles.

What miracles are in your life?

AMEN.

Psalm: from Psalm 142 - Stephen Mitchell's translation from the Hebrew (used as responsive reading)

I thirst for the living God; I ache for him day and night
When will he fill me with his presence? When will I see his face?
Why are you desolate, my soul? Why weighed down by despair?
Trust in God; he will save you; you will sing to him with great joy.

My soul is heavy with anguish; my heart keeps longing for God.
I am lost in a sea of wretchedness; I drown in the waters of despair.
The roar of waterfalls surrounds me, and the waves crash over my head.
Why are you desolate my soul? Why weighed down by despair?
Trust in God; he will save you; you will sing to him with great joy.

Notes on Psalm 42 from *Commentary on the Psalms Compiled from the Works of Emanuel Swedenborg* by Rev. Robert S. Fischer (Boston: MA: The Massachusetts New-Church Union, 1910): ... [To thirst signifies to desire truths. Longing for God's presence is the longing for Divine good and Divine truth in all aspects of our lives. The Psalmist speaks of the depths of anguish experienced during times of temptation and that by trusting in God you will be saved and your longing filled.](#)

Note on Mitchell's translation – Mitchell notes in the Forward to his *A Book of Psalms: Selected & Adapted from the Hebrew* that “the Psalmists, in the ardor of their praise, enter the sabbath mind and stand at the center of creation, saying, ‘Behold, it is very good’. ... The praise is addressed to whom? To what? When gratitude wells up through our whole body; we don't even ask... How supremely silly, then, to say that God is a he or a she. But, because English lacks a personal pronoun to express what includes and transcends both genders, even those who know better may refer to God as “he”. ... In the following adaptations, I have called God “him” for the lack of a better pronoun. You should, of course, feel free to substitute “her” if you wish.” The reading of the Psalm preserves Mitchell's original wording.

Sources Consulted

- *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal / Deuterocanonical Books*. New Revised Standard Edition. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989
- *The Jewish Study Bible* edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, Jewish Publication Society, TANAKH Translation. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- *The Jewish Annotated New Testament, New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler. New York: NY, Oxford University Press, 2011
- Autry, James A., *Looking Around for God: The Oddly Reverent Observations of an Unconventional Christian*. Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2007. Chapters 15 and 16.
- Dole, Anita S., *Bible Study Notes*. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2001. Note – no explanation of the Daniel text available in these notes. Volume Four: “The Lord’s Ministry” (Matthew Chap. 8; pages 331-343) and Volume Five: “Miracles” (Mark Chap. 5; pages 64-79).
- Fischer, R.S., *Commentary on the Psalms Compiled from the Works of Emanuel Swedenborg by Rev. Robert S. Fischer*. Boston: MA: The Massachusetts New-Church Union, 1910
- Killen, Patricia O’Connell, *Finding Our Voices: Women, Wisdom, and Faith*. New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company 1997. pages 46-48 and pages 84-86
- Kugel, James L., *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now*. New York, NY: Free Press, 2007
- Levine, Amy-Jill, *Bearing False Witness: Common Errors Made About Early Judaism*. In *The Jewish Annotated New Testament, New Revised Standard Version Bible Translation*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: NY, Oxford University Press, 2011), 502
- Mitchell, Stephen, *A Book of Psalms: Selected & Adapted from the Hebrew*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993.
- Rogers, E. Kent, *12 Miracles of Spiritual Growth: A Path of Healing from the Gospels*. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2012. Pages 56-72
- Werner, Soni S., *Growth of the Female Mind: Sincerity and Severity*. Rochester, MI: Fountain Publishing, 2013. Pages 81-85