

CLEANSED, HEALED, ACCEPTED AND LOVED

Her name was Marilyn. She was a seventh grade classmate of mine. I can see her now as clearly as if I was still a thirteen-year-old Junior High student. She was one of the so-called “untouchables”—and I mean that in the literal sense.

In gym class the boys and girls would occasionally mingle to learn square dancing, and we boys would cringe when the stars aligned in such a way that we had to dose-doe and swing your partner with Marilyn.

Many of the boys—and I’m not proud to say I have to include myself in the group—would leave as wide a space as possible between our hand and Marilyn’s when we were forced by the Phys Ed teacher to take her as our square dance partner.

Marilyn was one of those individuals you couldn’t help but back away from. She always had a kind of strange, other-worldly grin on her face. She wore ratty-looking clothes. She had body odor. Her stringy-brown hair fell to her shoulder in greasy strands. And, not to gross you out, but she even picked her nose—and didn’t seem to mind doing it when other people could see her.

Everyone who knew Marilyn understood without a doubt that she was doomed to be an outcast. Oh sure, there were other seventh graders who were kind of strange. They also wore ragged hand-me-downs, although perhaps not as dirty as Marilyn’s were. And there were a lot of us whose personal hygiene, at times, left something to be desired.

But, for whatever reason, with that mysterious “I don’t want anything to do with you at all” radar that adolescents often have, the junior high wolf pack judged Marilyn more harshly than others, and found her to be unclean, not welcome, a *persona non grata*.

Marilyn wasn't one of us, and she never would be. So she sat alone at lunch. She sat by herself at study hall. No one ever giggled with her in the hallway or passed her notes during class or asked her over to their house to do something after school.

If Marilyn accidentally brushed up against one of the boys, he would make gagging sounds and yell that she'd given him cooties. The rest of us would roar with laughter at his wit. Marilyn would just wander away silently, not giving us the satisfaction of acknowledging our meanness and cruelty.

As a youth, a seventh grader, I never really thought, except in brief, shame-laced imaginings, about what it must have been like to be Marilyn; to be such a total outcast—alone, rejected, unclean.

As an adult looking back, I cringe and feel terrible when I think about the damage it must have been caused to her spirit. A damage that, I regret to say, I helped contribute to.

Marilyn might have found a kindred soul in the woman with the flow of blood who was described in our reading from Mark's Gospel. She also was an outcast. She, too, was looked upon by those around her as unclean.

This woman, who was nameless like so many other women in the Bible, had been suffering from her affliction for twelve years. We don't know exactly what her health problem was. Perhaps what she suffered from back in Jesus' day could have easily been taken care of today, with a pill, or a simple outpatient procedure. But not in first century Palestine.

She had gone from one doctor to another, searching without success to find some relief from her condition, until her bank account was as empty as her life.

But that woman's problem wasn't simply the pain and discomfort from her bleeding. Listen to the words from Leviticus that condemn her to be an outcast.

"If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her menstruation, or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her menstruation, all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness; as in the days of her impurity, she shall be unclean.

Every bed on which she lies during all the days of her discharge shall be treated as the bed of her impurity; and everything on which she sits shall be unclean. Whoever touches these things shall be unclean. . . ."

Unclean. As long as she had this hemorrhage of blood, this unnamed woman would be considered impure. And everything—and everyone—she touched was also impure. Religiously and socially, she was an outcast.

She was cut off from other people, and from the sacred places of her faith. She couldn't worship in the Temple. Wherever she walked, wherever she sat down, wherever she slept was considered impure, dirty. And if she touched another person, including her husband, that person also became unclean and had to undergo ritual purification.

No wonder that poor woman was desperate. She had heard of Jesus and the miracles he had performed. Picture her in your mind, as she pushed through the crowd to make her way over to Christ, hoping and praying and probably close to tears in her anxiety to reach this rabbi who was her last, desperate hope.

Jairus, a leader in the synagogue, had come to Jesus directly and publicly. But this woman couldn't take that risk. She was too spiritually broken, felt too unclean, to even look Jesus in the face. She couldn't handle one more rejection. So she timidly and covertly made her way close to Jesus, reached out as he walked by, and her fingers brushed against the fringes of his cloak.

And that night, for the first time in twelve long years, she would sleep in a dry bed. For the first time in twelve years, she could break bread with her family at the same table they reclined at. For the first time in twelve years, she could take a friend's hand, or pick up a child, or embrace her husband.

Jesus, having felt her touch, called the woman to him and listened to her story. And he gently sent her back into life, saying, "Daughter, your faith has made you well."

I think it's interesting that the Greek word that is here translated "made well" is usually translated "save" in the New Testament.

The woman was no longer considered ritually unclean; she was saved from the thing that made her an outcast in her own community. She was more than simply made physically well; she was saved from a living death.

Today, such a fuss about blood flow might strike us as odd, archaic, and even inhumane, but it was the custom of the time. Ironically, when the woman in the story most needed love and support and someone who cared, she was cut off from everything and everyone who could have given it to her.

Unfortunately, the woman's experience isn't so unusual or uncommon. Like Marilyn from my Junior High School days, we have OUR outcasts, too. Maybe we ourselves have even felt like an outcast at times. Or at least we've encountered on our life's journey. We live in a time when racism and anti-Semitism are on the rise. Attacks on Asian-Americans and Hispanic people are common. And immigrants are screamed at and told to go back to where they came from—even if where they've come from is an American town or city.

And gay and lesbian often feel like outcasts. I have a friend, a Bangor Seminary graduate whom I came to know and like very much, who came out to his family and friends and acknowledged his homosexuality after a number of years of marriage and having children.

He told me over lunch, soon after admitting the truth to his wife about his sexual orientation, that for the longest time he was afraid to disclose the truth about himself because of the rejection and the feeling of uncleanness he knew he would experience.

Sadly, sometimes even people in the Christian church participate in behavior that isolates and casts people out. Yes, even followers of Jesus, the One who was so inclusive and whose ministry opened up God's Kingdom to anyone and everyone, can make other people feel unwelcome, unwanted and unclean, if only in small but noticeable ways.

Someone looks a little different or acts a little "strange;" their theology or political views are too liberal or too conservative; they're too pushy, or want to make too many changes in the congregation. And because of it they aren't fully accepted as fellow children of God or brothers or sisters in Christ.

Maybe not overtly, but in small, subtle ways, they can be made to feel unwelcome, unwanted and unclean, even in the Body of Christ.

When Jesus was touched by the woman with the hemorrhage who was deemed unclean and untouchable by society, he didn't recoil in horror. He didn't hurry off to the temple to undergo ritual cleansing.

Rather, Jesus insisted on finding out who she was. He immediately reached out to her. He showed her compassion. He accepted her as

she was, bleeding and all. He talked to her. He listened to her story. He welcomed her, he healed her, and he made her spirit whole again.

That's what Christ's church is called to do, as well: to accept and welcome all of God's children.

Some may ask, "But how can we possibly do that, when there are so many unacceptable and unwelcome people?"

That's the wrong question. The right question to ask is, "How can we not do that? After all that God has done for us; after all God has forgiven us for; after all Jesus Christ did on our behalf to welcome us into the family of God, How can we not accept and welcome all other children of God into community with us?

Especially knowing that the Lord accepts and welcomes them.

We can accept them more easily if we keep in our minds that none of us is perfect.

We can do it when we keep in mind the words of the Apostle Paul, who wrote that all of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory.

We can do that because Jesus has told us, before we make a move to point out the speck in someone else's eye, we must remove the beam of wood from our own eye.

A word to the wise for us followers of Christ: if we start making judgments about who should be allowed into God's Kingdom and who shouldn't, we may just find ourselves on the other side of the Gate, looking in.

You know, I have a hunch that, deep down inside all of us, there's a part of us that we feel is unclean. Maybe it's the little child that lives within who was told over and over again that he or she was stupid and would never amount to anything. Maybe we secretly feel like a failure at our jobs or our marriages or as parents or grandparents.

Maybe we feel that we're too fat, or too short, or too tall. Maybe we believe that we've failed totally at life. Maybe there's some hidden sin or wrongdoing, that's nagging at us and keeping us from being whole.

Maybe we feel as though no one, not even God, can accept the part of us that we believe is unclean. It's too dark, too shameful, too unacceptable.

And yet, it's precisely that dark, unacceptable, unclean part of us that Christ came into the world to cleanse, to heal, to make well, to save.

That's why some of us have come here this morning: to encounter the living Christ during this worship service, and to reach out and touch his cloak in hopes that we will be healed, cleansed, and made acceptable in God's sight.

The good news of our faith is that we can trust, we can believe,

and we can rest our hope in Jesus' compassion and mercy; and when we approach him for healing and cleansing, he will say to us as he said to that hemorrhaging woman he cured: "Your faith has saved you; your faith has made you well. Go in peace."

My prayer is that our church will be a place where all who enter will feel welcome and experience the power of Jesus Christ that cleanses and heals; and that they will hear Jesus speak through us to reassure them that they are accepted and beloved in God's eyes.

Thanks be to God. Amen.