



The Fringe of His Cloak

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

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The 8th Sunday after Pentecost

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You have in your hands this morning a tassel. It is a wee representation of the tassels and fringes that adorned our Lord's cloak. It is meant to be a symbolic rather than historically accurate representation. It's purpose is symbolic too, I'll explain how in a bit, but first let me say something about the importance of cloaks and tassels in the world of Jesus.

In the ancient world, among Israel's neighbors fringes and tassels had a number of meanings. The Assyrians and Babylonians was believed that wearing tassels and fringes along the edges of one's outer garments assured the wearer of the protection of the gods. The size and quality of these decorations were a sign of wearer's rank and authority in society. If someone asked a favor while grasping the tassels of another person's cloak, the wearer was obligated to grant the request.

The Bible instructed ancient Israelites to wear tassels that included a blue cord on corners of their outer garment (Numbers 15:37-41; Deuteronomy 22:12). This outer garment was a large rectangular piece of fabric that could be worn like a shawl or cloak or poncho over one's tunic. Among the poor this cloak also served as a sleeping blanket. The tassels at the corners served as a reminder that the LORD God had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, thus claiming them for a special covenant relationship defined by the Torah, the teaching or law of Moses. These distinctive tassels with a blue cord visibly and publicly identified the wearer as an Israelite, reminded them of what God had done for them, and what God expected of them.

A man sharing his tasseled cloak with a woman signified an intent to marry, as when Ruth asked Boaz to spread his cloak over her (Ruth 3:9). To marry a widow was described a removing her first husband's cloak (Deuteronomy 23:1). To cut the fringe or tassel off another person's cloak was a sign that your relationship with that person was over, as when David cut the tasseled corner off of his father-in-law Saul's cloak (1 Samuel 24:4-5). A man could divorce his wife by cutting the fringed and tasseled hem off her cloak.¹ To give your mantle to another at the end of your career or your life, effectively indicated that the receiver was to carry on in your place, as when the prophet Elijah handed over his mantle to Elisha (1 Kings 19:19).

¹ <http://www.bluthread.com/fringeold.htm>

In the Bible, God is sometimes depicted as wearing such a cloak. Isaiah received his call to the prophetic ministry during a vision in which he saw the fringed and tasseled hem of God's mantle filling the entire temple (Isaiah 6:1). Ezekiel's message of good news to the exiles in Babylon includes a vision report in which God covers the naked, bleeding, homeless people of Israel with the tasseled corner of his cloak (Ezekiel 16:8).

Today we hear that Jesus wore a such a cloak with tassels on the four corners, that the sick begged to be allowed to touch these tassels, and that all who touched them were healed (Mark 6:56). I wonder what these people thought when they were doing this. Did they believe that Jesus wore a magical healing cloak? Maybe they had heard how the woman with the hemorrhage was healed when she touched the fringe of Jesus' cloak? Did they believe that Jesus and/or the God whose agent he was, could not refuse their prayers for healing if they grasped the tassels on his cloak? I wonder, most of all, what really happened to all those people who touched the tassels on Jesus' cloak and were "healed"?

It is possible that they all rose up from their sick beds completely cured of whatever had put them there in the first place. In real life, that happens ... sometimes. But all too often it does not. In real life, some people get sick, are injured or disabled, and with good medical care they recover partially, learning to cope with diminished vitality and increasing infirmity. In real life, some people get sick, have accidents, are disabled, and don't get better. They are not cured, they are do not recover, even though they receive the very best of medical care, even though they and their loved ones send up boat-loads of prayers.

The world of Jesus was not some kind of magical, mystical, fairy tale world. The world of Jesus is the very same world in which we live today. So I cannot with any certainty say what those people who touched the tassels of Jesus' cloak really experienced. But I do know that every single person that Jesus healed that day eventually died. Even Lazarus whom Jesus pulled out of the grave four days after he had been buried, died and was buried again. Even Jesus himself died, was buried, and descended to the dead. The resurrected Christ – who is now beyond the power of death and will never ever die again – still bears the wounds of his crucifixion. The resurrection did not erase the physical marks of Christ's suffering. They remain even in eternity because the resurrected Christ is the same Jesus who was crucified. Without the pain and suffering and dying of Jesus there would be no resurrected Christ present with us everywhere. The wounds that the resurrected Christ bears even in eternity challenge us to an expanded, perhaps even paradoxical, understanding of what it means to be healed.

Perhaps the healing that comes with touching the tassels on Jesus' cloak is not about removing all traces of sickness from our bodies, wiping out our disabilities, or erasing our frailties and infirmities. Perhaps the healing that Jesus offers us is more like bringing some kind of structure in the midst of the chaos and messiness of sickness and disability. Maybe the healing Jesus offers us is about making sense of lives that are marked by illness or disability, and finding meaning and purpose even in the midst of that.

It is such a beautiful image, such a wonderful promise — all who touched the fringe of Jesus' cloak were healed. But I struggle with how to preach it as good news in real life where people get sick and don't get better. So let me start by saying what this verse can never, ever mean. If you or a loved one is sick and is not getting better, it can never ever mean that you or your loved one are not good enough or do not have enough faith. It can never ever mean that God has judged you, condemned you, or abandoned you. On this point there is absolutely no doubt, as Scripture teaches us, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38). Nothing in all of creation — no physical or mental illness, no disability of any kind, no injury, no frailty or infirmity, no sorrow or grief, no shame or guilt, no regrets that you may have — absolutely nothing will ever stop God from loving you, and covering you with the tasseled corner of his mantle.

Maybe that is the healing that comes with touching the tassels of Jesus' cloak — the assurance of God's unbreakable love for us in the midst of sickness and disability, injury and infirmity, sorrow and shame, guilt and regret.

My prayer for all of you, today, is that here in this place you will brush up against, touch, or grasp a tassel of Jesus' cloak. Perhaps in Word or Sacrament, in song or prayer, in caring conversations or the physical touch of a loved one or a neighbor may you experience the healing presence and power of Jesus. May knowing Christ, fill your hearts and minds with the peace of God that surpasses all understanding. Amen.

You may take the tassel home with you as a reminder that Christ has covered you with the corner of his mantle, will never ever let you go, and will walk with you down every single path and detour that life throws at you.