

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
June 27, 2021 5:45pm
13th Sunday of Year B Mark 5:21-43

Let me begin by posing these two questions. Why is it that according to the rules of etiquette it is always the lady who should first extend her hand to a gentleman, and never the gentleman first to the lady? Why is it that very observant Orthodox Jews, Hasidic Jews, for example, when going back and forth from their communities in Brooklyn to their places of business in the Jewelry District, travel in private buses so as to avoid being touched by a woman on the subway?

As we come to grips with the meaning of today's gospel, wherein Jesus cures the woman afflicted with hemorrhages, an answer will emerge that will challenge us to reconsider the origins of some of our present day taboos, prejudices and stereotypes. Today's gospel deals with something rather primal, something quite primitive, something we dimly recognize, but feel ill at ease in speaking about. It is that connection between women and blood that since the beginning of time has awakened in men, beset by a patriarchal mind-set, feelings of awe, fear, unease, even contempt? It is the anxiety that has led men to erect taboos and sanctions around women at the time of their monthly flow of blood, so that men would avoid contact with and thus any contamination from this mysterious process of nature?

What is the source, the origin of this taboo? Could it be that women are too vivid reminders of our fleshy, animal nature, of our lack of control over that nature? Women bleed but they do not die; from their bodies come the effluvia of death and decay. Women seem to be too much "of the body, too much of the flesh." Women remind us all that although our thoughts may dance like those of angels, that part of us of that is sublime and beautiful and evidence of the divine is inextricably tied to our most basic animal functions—that there is no escape from the flesh. Human beings have been described as "gods that defecate." We are bound to our bodies, and so we are bound to death, men and women alike.

I trust that you will not think this kind of talk too unseemly, but this is the issue with which this evening's gospel deals. For the Jews, blood, because it is symbolic of life, and therefore of death too, was always problematic. They would consider blood to be fine, so long as it was found where it belonged, inside the body, but outside, where it did not belong, blood presented all sorts of problems. Its presence rendered the bleeding person unclean, dirty, untouchable. The woman in today's gospel, who comes to Jesus looking to be cured of her hemorrhaging, of her irregular flow of blood,

presents the usual condition of woman, but to an extreme degree. In this encounter of the woman with Jesus, blood is not in its proper place, because blood is coming out of her. So, she is considered to be unclean, defiled, impure, untouchable. And likewise anyone with whom she comes in contact—in this case, Jesus, is likewise presumed to be unclean, impure, untouchable. *If you think this sort of misogyny, this way of demeaning women happens only in primitive societies, just remember the words of our former president during the presidential primary debates in 2016 when he said in reference to the journalist, Megyn Kelly, "There was blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her whatever." Later, he backtracked and said he meant "her nose."(Yeah, sure). Anyone who would applaud, much less condone such a remark, clearly does not share the attitude of Jesus in today's Gospel.***

How does Jesus deal with the situation? Jesus has no problem when He realizes this bleeding woman has touched him. Not so for the woman, who seems to have internalized society's judgment upon her—the true mark of the one who has become enslaved by a culture of oppression.. She believes herself to be "unclean." Full of self-loathing, yet desperate for a cure, she approaches Jesus cautiously, surreptitiously, under the cover of the crowd. But her scheme is revealed to all when Jesus shouts, "Who touched my clothes?" and she has to reveal herself as the culprit. Yet to her surprise and to the surprise of the crowd, Jesus praises her presumably transgressive act as being instead a mark of her faith. She is commended for having opened herself to the liberating power of God's love in the presence of Jesus. And now the crowd following Jesus will have to wonder how important, how sacrosanct, how valid are those distinctions which assign labels to people, designating some as clean or unclean, pure or impure.

The story of the hemorrhaging woman is bracketed by that of the story of Jairus, the well-respected synagogue leader, whose daughter is critically ill. We can almost hear the pathos in the words of this loving father, as he comes to Jesus begging for His help, "My daughter is at the point of death." The young girl, like the much older woman, appears to be beyond the help of any physician. But, again, the details here are significant. This girl is 12 years of age, about to become a woman. In healing her, Jesus returns her to her father who, as a synagogue official, is charged with preserving and enforcing the very same religious and social taboos that would stigmatize and condemn women, those taboos that he has just seen Jesus dismiss as worthless, even destructive, by the positive, affirming, empowering manner in which Jesus engaged and commended the faith of the bleeding woman.

The unanswered question is will the synagogue official's views be changed by what he has seen Jesus do for the bleeding woman. How will this synagogue official

receive his daughter back into society as a young girl on the threshold of womanhood? Will he welcome his daughter back into a world where her dignity and worth is still measured by the degree in which she conforms to inherited patriarchal judgments and strictures? Or, will Jairus' attitudes, his beliefs, his investment in the taboos of his society have been changed in any way because of what He has just seen Jesus say and do? Will Jairus, the synagogue official, work to shape a world in which all those taboos are seen as having no value at all? What will Jairus do, and more importantly what will we do?

Today's gospel challenges us to reflect on how we deal with differences, with taboos and stereotypes in our own society. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to respect, to value people precisely in their differences, to move beyond the taboos that would relegate some to a second-class state, and to build a society where all are treated fairly. In our own Roman Catholic Church, let us pray and work that women can achieve their full stature as children of God, exercising responsibility and leadership. On this Pride Sunday, that we may value and respect all gay, lesbian and trans people.

The words that Jesus addresses to Jairus are addressed to us as well, "Do not be afraid; just have faith." Or in another, and better translation. "Fear is useless, what is needed now is trust." So many of our prejudices and taboos are based on fear. Let us pray that we can make our own the example of acceptance, of liberation, of healing that Jesus provides in today's gospel. Let us work to create the kind of society He opens up for us. As we prayed in the opening oration of this evening's Mass, "Let us walk as children of the light," not in darkness, prejudice or obscurantism, but supported by the vision Jesus offers to us.

**This section was omitted in the delivering the homily, lest the political reference become a distraction to the main point.