

The Body and the Blood

Matthew 9, 2 Kings 5
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I tried to find a lighthearted way into the work we have before us today. Perhaps a story that would evoke fond memories of comfort, some curb appeal for the scripture, if you will. Or perhaps a little humor to get you on my side so that you would come with me from the street and through the front door of this mental space into which we are called today.

Our scripture is about bodies. And blood. It's about death and long-suffering.

And lighthearted, comfortable ways into those conversations are careless - at best - often corrosive to our spirits, caustically bad theology. We live and die, hope and dream, celebrate and suffer, and do the work of theology in bodies that bleed.

Our scripture is about bodies. And blood. It's about death and long-suffering. And I don't want to lure you in with a freshly painted front door. This is what we are going to find inside, and you are invited to come and see. But this is an invitation that dances with trauma. And you are not required to come in today. But if you do, if you come along with me, me us, I'd like to suggest a tool: if something in this scripture, in this sermon, lands with a thud in your spirit, if you can feel it in your body - acknowledge the experience. Interrogate it. "Hello grief. Hello rage. Hello despair. What do I need to do with you today?" And trust the answer that you get. Because you are never alone.

Our Hebrew Bible scripture today is about a powerful man whose military prowess and connection to the head of government could not save him from a disease that was literally eating his flesh. And in this story the girl who offers him a path to healing is THE most unlikely, the most marginalized human imaginable - because she is not only young and female, but a spoil of war, a captive, forcefully removed from her home into another land. But oh this protagonist is wise, and she tells the great and powerful warrior how to ask for help. That trope is exhausting but so is his predictable defiance - in fact the text says "rage" - because the help suggested to him did not seem important enough. A great prophet offered a path to wholeness but this man was pretty sure he knew better. And again, the voice of

reason came from marginalized, unnamed voices. Slaves. And they called out his arrogance and pointed him toward a restoration that could only come through humility.

I'm kind of annoyed with that story. With the way that marginalized humans drive the plot that a powerful military ruler finds restoration by just trusting simple wisdom. Does it feel like a really poorly thought out Hallmark movie?

It is definitely immersed, if you will, in the narrative that one must be cleansed, externally, to be acceptable to society and to God. It evokes what we know about ritual cleanliness. About washing before coming into the temple. About the ostracizing of those with disease, or women who were bleeding. And while physical healing is something that I think we ought to be about, we need to interrogate the idea that our bodies or our blood can ever make us unacceptable.

Which makes Jesus' actions in today's gospel reading so very poignant.

"My daughter has just died, come and lay your hands on her," wailed the father. Touching her dead body would have made Jesus ritually unclean. He was not supposed to do that. But the text tells us that Jesus just got up and went. He headed directly toward a dead body.

He was interrupted not by fear or propriety, but by a bleeding woman also yearning for healing. The bleeding woman was also ritually unclean. She would have been not only suffering from bleeding, month after month, year after year, but from the marginalizing that this brought. But Jesus turned and saw her. Jesus beheld her. Jesus kept proximity to her. Jesus honored her proximity to him. And Jesus spoke courage - and healing - to her.

And then, Jesus continues toward the dead body of the temple leader's daughter. Jesus goes right into the house. And Jesus spoke life into death. Arise, my love, said Jesus. Death has no hold on you.

Listen. We cannot miss Jesus' engagement with bodies and blood in defiance of what the religious communities thought was ritually required. And so we might wonder at what those rituals are in our religious communities. I suggest to you that in many of our religious communities those rituals look like pious gibberish about our suffering. Gibberish that suggests we ought not really engage.

Gibberish that suggests that our suffering can be glossed over as a part of some divine order. Perhaps you have heard this nonsense:

God needed another angel.

Everything happens for a reason.

Just trust God's timing. This is part of God's plan.

What kind of ritual "we can't touch death" mess is that?

Jesus says none of those things. Jesus does not say "hey Dad, God is good all the time!" or "I know God is going to use her death for good." Jesus does not quip about this being God's plan. Jesus intervenes. Jesus acts to intervene in death. And Jesus does not pretend not to notice the bleeding woman. Jesus looks directly at her.

These females were unclean, unimportant, unseen shadows on the edges. Well. At least there are those who would have believed that. But they are brought to life by Jesus' attentiveness.

I want to stay here seeing the bleeding woman with Jesus for a few more minutes, because churches are notoriously bad at doing that. The fact that this woman had been bleeding for 12 years alerts us to many possibilities: she is likely to have been kept physically outside of the village or her family's compound; she is likely to be lonely; she is likely to be barren; she is likely to have been cramping and in pain. Her life is likely to be in shambles.

Our churches are full of bleeding women. You may know them. You may be one of them. We must specifically name infertility and miscarriage just as clearly as we specifically name all sorts of other bodily hurt. We should name injury from abuse just as clearly as we specifically name all sorts of other bodily injury. We should not allow church to be a place where bleeding women just grasp at Jesus' fringe, not sure whether they deserve to be seen.

And have mercy, when we start to take stock of the bodies. Of parents wailing for dead children. There is nothing, no ritual or piety or propriety or trite replies that should keep us from following Jesus into interrupting death.

What does this work of seeing bleeding women and interrupting death look like for us? For you? For me? I don't know for sure. And each of us are called to somewhere different. We are called to tables where policies are made. We are

called to protests. We are called to school board meetings and into schools. Who are you called to see? To whose bleeding must you hold proximity?

How might you interrupt death in your city? How might you interrupt death in your neighborhood? How might you interrupt death among young people? How might you interrupt death among young men? Young women? Trans youth? How might you interrupt death in the LGBTQIA community? Among people of color?

Family of God - Jesus wants to know exactly who we are. Jesus wants to interrupt our death. When we are bleeding he wants to see our face.

Can we follow this Jesus? Nothing about our bodies or our blood can make us unacceptable.

Will you follow this Jesus drawing near to the body and the blood? Will I?

So may it be.