

Companions IN PRAYER



Sisters of St. Clare
Saginaw, MI

Jesus heals the crowds: A reflection on Mark 5:21-43

Jesus often has a crowd around him interested in what he is saying and doing. As we read the Gospels, we become like the crowds who follow Jesus, and we are deeply affected by observing and hearing his words.

In this Gospel account, the crowd is walking with Jesus on his way to heal the daughter of Jarius. Suddenly Jesus says he is aware of power leaving him.

Desperate for healing, a woman has crawled through the crowd and touched the hem of Jesus' clothes. We are told: "Jesus, aware at once that power had gone out from him, turned around in the crowd and asked, 'Who has touched my clothes?'" The woman admits that she has touched his robe and tells him of her bleeding illness. Those in the crowd hear her tell Jesus about her disease.

When the people in the crowd recognized this sick woman in their midst, they must have been frightened and angry. In that time people considered menstruating women unclean and religiously impure. Some people believed that women bled because they were possessed by an evil spirit. Because of these beliefs, a menstruating woman was kept separate from the community so as not to contaminate others. She was relieved of many of her normal duties. She was not required to draw and carry water from the well. She did not have to cook or serve

food to members of the family. She did not have to go to the marketplace. She did not have sexual intercourse. The days of her menstrual period were regarded as a quiet time, a time for herself. (Lev 15:19-31) If the

bleeding did not stop, the woman was permanently excluded. Perhaps the patriarchal society at that time thought menstruation unnatural because the men did not experience it.

In this Gospel account the crowd is seeing a woman who has suffered the severe consequences of exclusion. She is terrified because she had broken the purity laws and, in touching Jesus, she had made him ritually unclean as well. Any person

she had touched in the crowd was also ritually unclean. Each of them would have to go through a process of ritual cleansing which involved bathing, changing their clothes and being alone until the evening.

She admits her situation to Jesus and the crowd; I can imagine the crowd gasping and moving away from the woman, fearing she had touched someone or all of them. Jesus takes command of the situation and pronounces that her faith has healed her. Jesus does not claim that he healed her; rather, it was her faith. This healing affects the crowd as well. Will the crowd believe in Jesus or believe in the purity laws? Jesus's choice to have the woman healed in a public rather than a private place no



Mark 5:21-43

doubt awakened many in the crowd to question their own acceptance of the purity laws that were part of their culture.

Each person in the crowd has to wonder at what Jesus just did. Jesus is confronting their assumptions about rules and laws that exclude people rather than protect them. Everyone in the crowd is left with a decision to make just as the woman had to do; continue following Jesus to Jairus's house or perform the ritual cleansing, changing clothes and remaining alone until evening. This desperate woman made her decision and was healed by her faith. Now everyone in the crowd had to decide. In healing the woman in front of many people, Jesus was himself making a public statement, a dangerous one, about his own view of the religious laws he found to be against his ideas of justice and mercy. In doing what he did, he was breaking the religious laws of his time and rebelling against the church leaders.

We know what it is like being in a crowd. We can be oblivious of others around us. Additionally, we can be alarmed by someone who looks very ill. Maybe they have a disease that is contagious. Maybe we are at risk. Or they can look different from us. They may be Muslim and we wonder if we are safe. Or someone with a shaved head and tattoos. Are they suspicious in our minds because they cause fear? Or does some strange behavior or vocal sounds by a person with developmental disabilities or a profoundly deaf individual create some fear in us?

Pope Francis is a person in today's world who has this healing effect on a crowd as more people become skeptical about their faith. People gather to see him, and he seeks out the disabled person to kiss. This is often

the person others do not see or choose to ignore or fear. He says and does things we are not used to hearing. He speaks of mercy instead of legalistic interpretations of prevailing norms. We listen with new ears.

Recently speaking to reporters, Pope Francis responded to questions about whether there was a "gay lobby" in the Vatican. He said, "If a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge?" His response reveals his deep compassion for all people. In addition, this month he created a commission to investigate bishops involved in the cover-up of the sexual abuse scandal. We, as the crowd observing these actions, see a new authority acting.

Pope Francis is teaching us to see what Jesus sees. As part of the crowd listening to Pope Francis, we love him because it feels as if he sees us and our thoughts and fears. He speaks of mercy, and we lean in to hear more of what he is saying. As a result, we feel our fears put to rest, our spirits being healed and our faith encouraged. The primacy of mercy, by both Jesus and Francis, over all other values in our dealings with one another is something our tradition hasn't held up forcefully or clearly enough. But – it's a new day. Just as it was when Jesus responded to the woman and just as Francis responded to the reporter's question.

It's time to see with eyes of mercy.

(We are interested in your thoughts. Let us know at: <http://srsclare.com/about-us/companions-in-prayer-newsletter>)

Sr. Laura and Sisters

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