

Proper 8, Year B
Mark 5: 25-34
June 28, 2009

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, CA

Echoes of the Bleeding Woman:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Have you been tracking all the hoopla over Michael Jackson's death? It's amazing. Within minutes, the web was abuzz with tweets and e-mails and blogs. Amazon sold out all his CD's and DVD's. I-Tunes went wild. Within hours, folks were massing in front of his mansion. I heard one woman say, "I just need to be close to him." On Friday night, ABC News devoted almost the whole nightly news program to Michael Jackson. Even PBS got into the mix—The News Hour did a segment on him.

I don't get it. What do folks see in Michael Jackson? What is his lure? Why this obsession with the man and with his death? Folks tell me at his prime he was a great artist. One of a kind. A dancer on a par with Fred Astaire. A high-voice singer steeped in his tradition. But still I wonder, "What do folks see in this boy child who crosses boundaries and blurs lines?" "What gives with this black man with white skin?" "What's the story of this man who looks more like a woman than a man?" "What's with this man who lives in a place called Neverland?"

At first I was repelled. The boyish voice. The girlish face. The ghoulish skin. Do you hear the judgment in my voice?

Is this fascination with him and with his death a major distraction—a way of shifting our focus from important things in life? Or is something else at work. I wonder.

And then I take a second look. I find myself wondering what is he really saying. What is the truth of Michael Jackson's life. Could that skin, that reshaped nose, that page-boy hair say something quite profound? Now when I look at all those pictures and clips of Michael Jackson I find myself wondering, "Is he saying, 'There's so much more to me than meets the eye?'" "Is he challenging us to look deeper into the truth of his life?" "Is he asking us to look through the image to the pain?" Perhaps.

The truth of people's lives is so elusive. Not something you grasp from the surface of a life. We tend to keep our truths deeply hidden. Under cover. Away from harm's way.

After all, it's risky to reveal our gnawing pain, our outrageous hopes, our moments of shame. Better to keep that hidden lest folks judge us or shun us, scoff at us or laugh at us. After all, it's risky to put yourself out there.

And yet, I think, we long to be known for who we are. We long to be known, accepted and loved in the very truth of our lives—our disappointments, our doubts, our searing wounds and soaring hopes. That's where we want to be known; that's where we want to be loved; that's where we want to be healed of the pain.

Yet like that bleeding woman, folks tend to cover all that up. Until the weight of it becomes too much to bear.

Twelve years she lived with a constant flow of blood. Twelve years of being thought unclean. Twelve years of enduring all that ritual uncleanliness entails—the bed she slept in, the chair sat in, the people she brushed against all polluted.¹ Of course people gave her wide berth. Of course they stayed away. Her very touch would give them pause. After all, uncleanliness was contagious. Think of the loneliness and isolation, the shame and fear she endured.

Twelve years of losing blood. That's twelve years of acute anemia and all that anemia brings with it—the aching joints, the brittle nails, the listlessness, and the heightened vulnerability to disease.² Think of the toll those years took on her. Think of the weariness she felt.

Is it any surprise she chased after every cure the doctors offered—losing all she had along the way?

No wonder she braves the crowd. No wonder she sidles forward to touch Jesus' hem. No wonder she reaches out her hand. No wonder she grabs a hold of the tassels on his cloak. He's all the hope she has

He feels power going forth from him. He stops and turns towards the crowd. "Who touched me?" he asks.

She makes her way forward. Filled with trembling and fear she kneels before him and tells him the truth of her life—the loneliness and isolation, the shame, the fear, the weakness and the pain. It flows out of her, like a river overflowing its banks. Then she hears him say, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace..."

"Daughter"—what volumes a single word can speak! "Daughter," in that one word he says to her, "You are my kin, you are my blood, we are one." In a single word, Jesus takes the truth of that woman's life—all the pain, all the sorrow, all the isolation and the brokenness—and blesses it. Jesus takes her as she is and claims her as His own.

Isn't that what we all want—to be claimed as God's own? To be known, accepted and loved as we are. To be part of the family—the family of God.

What funny ways we have of getting there.

Some of us hunker down and hope that God will notice. I know that route. I've traveled it myself a time or two.

Some, like teenagers I have taught, have to test the limits—acting out, screaming "notice me" in so many different ways.

Some of us come out with horns a blaring—saying “This is who I am.” There’s a little bit of that at work in the Pride March taking place in San Francisco as we worship here today—folks long ignored or cast aside or persecuted even—claiming their identity, their truth with pride.

Some, like Michael Jackson I suspect, challenge God and challenge us as well, to look beyond the surface, to see the pain running deep inside.

To all, to all of us, God’s reply is always the same. “You are somebody.” “You are my child.” “I love you—just as you are.” To all of us God says, “There are no limits to my love.”

All God asks of us is that we reach out our hand—to God and to one another. The rest is grace—amazing grace.

¹Mary Ann Tolbert, “Mark” in The Women’s Bible Commentary, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, editors (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 268.

²William L. Lane, The Gospel of Mark, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 192 n 46.