"Consider the Lilies: Attend to the Hurting,"
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 10/11/26

Twelve years: that's a long time to be sick. It's how long this woman has been hemorrhaging when she reaches out to touch Jesus's cloak. Mark isn't exactly clear from whence she is bleeding – interpreters have long assumed that her flow of blood is vaginal. Which might explain why Mark fails to mention the exact source of the blood: propriety and all that. But whether she's bleeding from her reproductive organs or her arm, this woman has been suffering for a long time. Twelve years. As long as Jairus's young daughter has been alive, Mark will later tell us.

And in all that time, no one has been able to help her. This unnamed woman has spent all her money looking for a cure for what ails her. She spends all that she has, to no avail – no physician has been able to provide her relief. So here she is – impoverished, and still sick. Still sick, worse than before, even – and probably lonely as well. Getting out of the house is a challenge when you're bleeding constantly, no matter where the blood is coming from. And regular loss of blood may have caused the woman to be anemic, leading to weakness, fatigue, shortness of breath; no iron supplements or blood transfusions to help.

Some scholars of this passage suggest that on top of the ordinary isolation resulting from a long illness, the hemorrhaging woman would have been additionally isolated from her community by being considered ritually unclean. If so, that could have led others to avoid touching her or even objects she had come into contact with, lest *her* impurity be transferred to them. Mark doesn't mention anything about Jewish purity laws in this account, and scholars are still in the process of understanding how Levitical ideas about ritual purity were actually applied in the first century, especially in small rural communities like this town by the Sea of Galilee. But it's safe to say that this woman was hurting. Hurting physically, certainly, and for sure economically. Hurting emotionally, as well, as far as we can imagine, considering everything that has happened to her. And mostly likely hurting socially on top of everything else. And not just for a little while. For twelve long years.

And then along comes Jesus. And that gives the woman an idea. Maybe, just maybe, this Jesus can do something about her condition. Maybe, just maybe, he can heal her. All she would have to do is touch him, she figures – not stop him to ask for help, not make a big deal about appearing in public when she usually keeps to herself – no, just be in the crowd, just get close enough to reach out and touch the healer, or even his outer garment. What has she got to lose? Nothing else has worked. And she is so tired: so tired of being sick, so tired of being poor, so tired of being alone. So without fanfare, she joins the crowd pressing in on Jesus as he travels to the home of Jairus the synagogue leader, whose daughter is also sick, sick to the point of death.

The woman joins the crowd – she reaches out – and she is healed. Immediately. Immediately: Mark's favorite word. The woman can tell immediately that something in her body has changed. And so can Jesus. He knows immediately that something in *his* body has changed – that power has gone out from him. Someone has been healed. But who? Either Jesus isn't sure who has been healed or he can't see the woman for the crowd. Either way, he stops. He stops, even though the healing has already occurred, even though he knows that the life of Jairus's daughter hangs in the balance. Even so, Jesus stops. And he asks, who touched me? The disciples, in all their typical misunderstanding of what Jesus is up to, think that it's ridiculous for him to ask who touched him, given the large size and claustrophobic proximity of the crowd. But Jesus knows that something miraculous has happened. And he stops what he is doing to find out who has received his healing power.

Jesus did not have to stop. He could have hurried on to Jairus's house, trusting that the healing in the crowd had been effective and not worrying too much about the details. He could have let the woman remain anonymous, as she seemed to want to be. But Jesus didn't rush ahead. He paid attention to what had happened in his body and he stopped. He stopped to learn more about the person who had received the Holy Spirit-filled power that went out from him. He stopped to give this person his full and undivided attention; he stopped to give his full and undivided attention to a woman who had suffered so much, for so long. And he made the crowd pay attention to her, as well.

That's what I love about this story. It shows us a Jesus who is not in a rush. He knows that Jairus's daughter needs his attention, but not more than this woman right in front of him needs his attention. He pays attention to the woman: he bears witness to her pain as she falls at his feet and tells him the whole truth. That's healing too – not just release from her debilitating physical condition, but also the chance to tell her story. To have someone take the time to hear her and to understand all she has suffered. Jesus takes the time, offers the woman an emotional release to accompany the physical release she experienced at the moment she reached out to touch Jesus. How desperately she must have needed that opportunity to share her truth. She reached out to Jesus and he in turn reached out to her – that's healing too.

And furthermore, Jesus takes the time to hear the woman's story not by drawing her away to a secluded spot to share with him and him alone, but rather he gives her the opportunity right there and then, in the midst of the crowd of people, her neighbors,

her community. The whole town gets to hear what she has suffered; the whole town gets to hear that she has been healed. I guess it was good for Jesus to do it this way – it was an object lesson for the whole crowd of people about the extent of his power, his ability to heal without even touching someone, without even doing it intentionally. But it was also an opportunity for the woman to reconnect with the community that she had lost. For everyone to hear her story, for everyone to have compassion for her – for her whole community to bear collective witness to her pain. Another step toward healing not just her body but her spirit, not just her physical ailment but also her loneliness. Jesus pays attention to it all, and he wants the community to pay attention too.

Last week as we were celebrating World Communion Sunday I was reminded of another World Communion celebration, several years ago at the church I served in Austin. That congregation had a tradition of marking World Communion by decorating the table with an abundance of bread and grapes. Challah, pita, tortillas, dinner rolls, seeded, rye, brown – anything we could source at the local upmarket grocery store. And then we'd get as many colors and shapes and sizes of grapes as we could find, and have it all spilling out of baskets on the communion table. A reminder that when we come to the table, we are partaking of the abundance of God's grace for us. And a reminder that through the sacrament, we are all connected with each other, all across the world, no matter what kind of bread graces our tables.

One year after worship, we took all the baskets of bread and grapes downstairs and put them on roundtops in our fellowship hall, as table decorations of another kind – table decorations for an event we had planned, part of the Undocumented Stories Project, from Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Undocumented Stories gives people in the Austin community an opportunity to share their stories: specifically for people who have come from other countries and are living in the United States without legal documentation to share their stories with the wider community. So often, folks who are undocumented end up isolated, silenced, unable to share the whole truths of their lives for fear of the potential repercussions: arrest, separation from their families, detention, deportation. So many reasons to stay silent. But in the safety of churches and other religious spaces, Undocumented Stories gives individuals the opportunity to share openly and honestly about their lives – and it gives the community an opportunity to bear witness to their stories.

That night, sitting around tables covered in bread and grapes, we met Patricia. Pati, as her friends know her, was brought across the US-Mexico border by her mother when she was 10 months old. Her mother was trying to escape a life of poverty as well as an abusive husband, and Pati's older siblings were already living and working in California. Pati's first steps were on American soil. When she was a little older, she and her mother moved to Texas, where Pati later met her husband, also undocumented. One day when they were preparing to leave for a waterpark vacation with their four children, her husband was arrested by ICE agents in front of their home. He was eventually deported to Mexico.

Following his deportation, Pati had to make the difficult decision to stay in Texas, to continue raising her kids in a place where she feels they are physically safer and have more educational opportunities available to them – even though they don't have their dad. When we heard her story, Pati had been waiting in line for her own immigration interview for over 24 years, trying to do everything right so she could stay legally in the United States with her citizen children. She told us how frustrating it is to be judged for her immigration status when this country is the only one she has ever known. And she told us she wished her neighbors judged her instead on the strength she has found: strength to run a business, to raise her kids on her own, to make a life for her family, despite all she has faced.

That October night those of us gathered around grape-strewn tables stopped what we were doing – we paused in the midst of busy lives to bear witness to someone else's story. Jesus invited us, like he invited the crowd in today's story from Mark – Jesus invited us to truly listen to the pain and suffering of a hurting person. And, like that crowd who heard the testimony of the woman who had been healed of her hemorrhage, on that night of storytelling Jesus invited us to hear the way that God has been at work in a woman's life. Pati told us that she used to be ashamed of her story, embarrassed by her heritage, afraid to share her whole truth. But through her faith in God, through God's love at work in her life, she has learned to bravely share all that she has been through, in the hopes that it will turn the hearts of her neighbors who still believe she doesn't belong.

Whose stories do we take the time to hear? Whose testimony are we paying attention to? Jesus invites us to stop – Jesus invites us to pause in the midst of busy lives and attend to the stories of those who are hurting. Jesus invites us to pause and bear witness, to bear witness to their whole truths – for their healing, and for ours.