

December 19, 2010

The Sunday Before Christmas

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

As Jesus begins to walk toward the home of Jairus, where He will raise Jairus's daughter from the dead, a large crowd of followers is pressing around Him. Hiding within this crowd is a woman who, strictly speaking, is not supposed to be there, mixing indiscriminately with other people. She is ritually unclean.

Twelve years earlier, this woman began to "have her period," something that she had taken as normal since the age of twelve or younger. She did not worry about this; it was a scheduled inconvenience, as it were, a nuisance at best, something women had experienced ever since the day when Eve took that first bite of the forbidden apple. She was confident, however, that the bleeding would be over in a few days.

Meanwhile, this lady recognized a social fact: she was ritually impure, according to the Mosaic Law. And, as ritually impure, she suffered a limited measure of monthly ostracism: For instance, she did not eat at the common table with her family during this time. Indeed, she was forbidden to prepare the family's meals. She slept alone and was prohibited from touching her husband and children for a few days. The details were all worked out in the Torah. It would be over soon; the proper sacrifice would be offered, and she could return to her normal life and routine.

Much to her chagrin, nonetheless, the bleeding did not stop. It continued for a whole month, and then a second month, and then a third. At some point she consult physicians about the problem, but to no avail. Indeed, according to the Gospel of Mark, her consultation with the doctors actually things worse---This is a detail omitted by St. Luke, who was a physician!

By the end of the year, the lady was in terrible shape. She suffered from severe anemia, from the loss of blood and iron. Her nerves were on edge. She had not touched another human being in twelve months. Instead of enduring ostracism for a few days, she started to suffer the emotional ravages of total isolation.

Her responses grew erratic and strange, as depression became chronic. By the end of a year, the woman's self-image and sense of personal dignity were severely impaired. But a second year followed, and this one much worse.

Let us not regard this woman as a character in one of Jesus' parables. She is a real person, whose very soul and body are being destroyed by a condition over which she has no control. By the time we find her in the Gospel story (Matthew

9:20-22; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48), this lady has suffered the trauma and devastation of her condition for twelve whole years. Meanwhile, her children have grown up, and now she has grandchildren, whom she is forbidden to touch. Life is passing her by, and her sole hope is that it would pass by quickly.

She is bent and beaten. Those who knew her could say, "Who has believed our report? There is no beauty in her. She is despised and rejected of men, a woman of sorrows and acquainted with grief. We turned our faces, as it were, away from her. She is smitten by God and afflicted." Like Job, she longs to die--anything to escape the fate, in which her hopeless existence is reduced to the confines of a coffin: sick beyond measure, emotionally isolated, physically weak, unable to think clearly, totally listless in mind and body, and deprived of elementary hope---a skeleton of herself.

Nonetheless, the lady has, of late, heard a rumor about the wonder-worker, Jesus of Nazareth. There is word on the street that healings have been conveyed by the mere touch of His clothing (Matthew 14:36).

Clinging desperately to this final hope, she resolves even to violate the Law by hiding herself in a crowd. Unnoticed, she inches forward to the point where her extended finger, reaching through the other bodies in the crowd, can barely touch the hem of Jesus' garment. "And immediately," says Luke, her flow of blood stopped" (8:44). She feels the sudden surge of health rushing into her wasted frame. The trauma of twelve years is over!

Yes, it's over, but something new is just about to begin. This lady is not the only one who felt something when Jesus' garment was touched. Jesus, also, perceives that power---*dynamis*---had gone out from Him, and He is unwilling to let the matter lie. Turning about, He declares, "Somebody touched Me, for I perceived power going out from Me."

Indeed, somebody. For twelve years this woman has thought of herself as a nobody, but to Jesus she is somebody. He will not permit this woman to be concealed, lost, and absorbed in a crowd. She is *somebody*! Now healed in body by physical act of touching, she must begin the healing of her spirit by being spoken to and reassured.

So, He who calls each of His sheep by name requires the lady to come forward and be *identified*: "Now," says Luke, "when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before Him, she declared to Him in the presence of all the people the reason she had touched Him and how she was healed immediately."

Jesus then declares the word of personal reassurance to begin the healing of

her soul: "Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

It is legitimate to wonder what the lady thought of this reference to her faith. She probably felt she had no faith at all. In her case, faith had disguised itself as desperation. Yet, weak as it was---no larger than a mustard seed---this faith had filled the finger she placed on the fringe of Jesus' robe. It had been sufficient; the mountain was moved and thrown into the sea.

©2010 Patrick Henry Reardon

All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php