

## *Your Faith Has Made You Well*

Sermon Preached By  
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...A large crowd followed [Jesus] and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.' Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?"' He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.' [Mark 5:24-34]

### **The Wild Geese**

Horseback on Sunday morning,  
harvest over, we taste persimmon  
and wild grape, sharp and sweet  
of summer's end. In time's maze  
over fall fields, we name names  
that went west from here, names  
that rest upon graves. We open  
a persimmon seed to find the tree  
that stands in promise,  
pale, in the seed's marrow.  
Geese appear high over us,  
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,  
as in love or sleep, holds  
them to their way, clear,  
in the ancient faith: what we need  
is here. And we pray, not  
for new earth or heaven, but to be  
quiet in heart, and in eye  
clear. What we need is here.

*Wendell Berry*

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Evidently here in Rensselaerville it's the year of the poet. To draw your summer preaching theme from Wendell Berry, one of the great poets of our generation – who is also a farmer, an activist, a novelist and scholar and one of the most important environmentalists of this or any generation – strikes me as perfectly in keeping with the summer habit this congregation has of listening to a whole symphony of voices, one voice at a time, telling whatever particular truth each of us can tell in whatever common key the chosen theme may represent. Wendell Berry is a whole symphony of voices in himself - a poet of scriptural proportions: vast, memorable, and deceptively simple. He puts not only his heart and his mind into his words, but also his back, his hands, his conscience, and his bones which is where he loves this earth we share. Any of us should ply that much of ourselves to this work of thinking about how to live our faith.

“What we need is here.” What a line! You're going to have a whole summer of sufficiency: 11 weeks of *yes we can*, encouraging you to believe that we *can* do this thing that we have set for ourselves – or, that God has set for us – to do. By the end of August you'll all be poets of the possible – like Emily Dickinson, who (at least on a good day) felt that she *inhabited* it:

I dwell in Possibility –  
A fairer House than Prose –  
More numerous of Windows –  
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –  
Impregnable of eye –  
And for an everlasting Roof  
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –  
For Occupation – This –  
The spreading wide my narrow Hands  
To gather Paradise –

But it's brave of you, too, to have set this course for your summer together – because we know that it can be a long, hard way to that dwelling of possibility and sufficiency. There are many in this world – perhaps many of you – who would have to respond to Emily's exuberant dwelling in possibility, or Wendell Berry's quiet affirmation that what we need is here, with an urgent question of your own: *and if what I need is not here – what then?* We dare not be too blithe or poetic about sufficiency – for if keeping a church going, and keeping on going to church, has taught us anything, it's that the unrequited yearning of this world, physical and spiritual, is as real and as prosaic and insistent as can be, and the gnawing of the hungers of our

humanity sometimes consumes every ounce of spiritual energy we have. When Wendell Berry says, in his quiet way, *what we need is here* – says it twice – he’s pushing back against something: some certainty we have of *insufficiency*, some unsatisfied hunger, some sense that we don’t have or don’t deserve or won’t be able to find what’s needed to thrive in our humanity, to fuel our faith. He takes lessons from wild geese about how to stare down that doubt. We take them, in the company of Jesus, from the lilies of the field, from the mustardseed, from the lost coin and the found pearl.

It’s that sense of pushing back against doubt that turned my thoughts quickly to the woman with the chronic hemorrhage – and especially to that audacious punch-line of her story, “your faith has made you well.” That’s a line of scriptural proportions: vast, memorable – and troubling. When we hear those words on Jesus’ lips, I wonder if it sets off a kind of instinctive comparison: *her* faith made her well – but would *mine*? Does that doubt rear its head: she has what she needs; but is what *I* need here? Where do I look for it? Who do you have to be to be given the gift of such faith as can heal whatever has gone wrong in the deepest and most secret places within you?

Let’s remember the particulars of this woman’s situation – all the reasons she has to despair of the availability of what she needs. The menstrual bleeding that she has endured for *years* threatens every aspect of her existence: it not only puts her health in chronic jeopardy, but it has exhausted the financial resources she apparently once had, but has no longer. No one knows how to cure her; we can scarcely imagine the suffering she’s endured at the hands of the many who have tried. And, in the culture around her, the prevailing belief is that her infirmity makes her ritually impure – and, worse, that her impurity is contagious: to touch her is to become ritually unclean yourself. It’s a perfect storm of marginalization.

And let’s remember, too, the particulars of the situation in which Jesus encountered her. He has been trying to instill some of the compassion of God in people who are so burdened by their own sense of sinfulness that they can’t believe they’d be welcome at the Table, can’t bring themselves to imagine that the Kingdom of Heaven has anything to do with them. *But even if you have just that much faith, just a mustardseed’s-worth, it’s enough*, he says; *if you forgive your neighbor, you’ll be forgiven*, he says; *if you’re poor, or lame, or disfigured, one of “them” instead of one of “us,” you still belong*, he says. He’s a healer, because God is a healer and he is full to overflowing with God; but everywhere he goes there are people pressing in on him who just want to watch the spectacle play out, people who hold themselves back from the movement because they don’t dare take the risk of letting it transform the way they see each other and the way they see themselves.

So the woman is at the edge. And Jesus is trying to push the edge. The crowds are impossible to navigate. But they are destined to meet. “What we need is here.” Perhaps that’s the way the woman was thinking as she pulled her scarf close around her face so as not to be recognized as “the unclean one” when she risked the street. Perhaps that’s how she understood the movement that seemed to be gathering strength around the traveling rabbi: the long-awaited, the much-prayed-for, the holy one.

On the far side of her healing, the words Jesus speaks to her sound gracious and affirming, perhaps even a little self-deprecating on his part: “your faith has made you well.” *You* made this possible, he seems to be saying; it was your courage, your tenacity, your trust in the compassion of God – not just my faithfulness, he says, but yours too, that made this transformation. If he’d said those words on the near-side, before the healing, they’d sound the way I fear they sound to many of us – like a test: let’s see if your faith can make you well – if you have enough of it, if you are trusting or loving or obedient enough to win the prize.

But what was it she needed? And what was it she got?

Look at the woman again as she makes her way out into the crowd. She has heard about Jesus, Mark tells us. What has she heard? Some of the startling words and gestures of his teaching are in the air; perhaps she’s heard some of them in the buzz. “To the one who has will more be given; but to the one who has nothing, even what that one has will be taken away.” (Mk 4:25) *OK, OK – I’ve lost nearly everything, but – what do I have, of which I could be given more?* “The Kingdom of God is as though a person scattered seed on the earth, then went to sleep – and while that one slept, the seed sprouted and grew – though the sower knew not how.” (Mk. 4:26-7) *OK, OK – what is there to lose in planting seeds? – seeing how they seem to grow of their own accord, as though there is an engine of life inside of them.* “The Kingdom of God is like a mustardseed: the smallest of seeds, yet when it grows, it is the greatest of plants, and the birds of the air nest in its branches.” (Mk. 4:31-2). *OK, OK – how small a grain of hope can you plant?* “Your sins are forgiven; take up your sickbed and walk.” *OK – what would it be like to walk in that kind of freedom – without all the extra luggage of my own inadequacy?*

She touches her bandages, adjusts her scarf, draws her cloak close. Words of an old song weave among her heartbeats - *As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul thirsts for you... When shall I behold your face? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, ‘Where is your God?’ As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul thirsts... Abandon, as in love or sleep, holds her to her way, clear in the ancient faith: ... made in the image and likeness of God ... I will never forget you – behold, I have carved you in the palm of my hand ... Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth... And she prays, not for new earth or heaven, but to be quiet in heart, and in eye clear.*

When we read this story through the lens of the line, “What we need is here,” we think it means Jesus, here at last.

But what if Jesus thinks it means us? You dwell in possibility, he suggests – a fairer house than prose. You, even with your narrow hands, spread them like wings and gather paradise. Those with ears, let them hear; those with eyes, open clear; those with hearts, quiet. What God needs to finish this work of healing is here. Maybe that’s why Jesus wheels around, even in the midst of the crowd, to see who touched him: he can feel the holy presence of the broken-hearted one who dwells in possibility, who leans in love, who is brave enough and humble enough to touch the edge, even just the edge, and know that it will embrace her in, not push her out.

As it happens, Mary Oliver has her own poem about wild geese. I don't think she meant to be writing in the voice of Jesus... But it's the year of the poet in Rensselaerville, and here we are in this storied place, with this Table spread before us, this sunlight bathing us, all the hopes our ancestors brought with them like little mustardseeds and planted in the soil of this church, the church, any church, hoping the seeds would grow, though they knew not how... Here we are, clear in the ancient faith, singing with abandon because, since we can't fly like geese, we sing like them. Here we are, yearning like deer for the brooks of water, wondering if we belong, wondering if our sins can be forgiven, wondering if that tiny comes-and-goes grain of faith could possibly be enough, wondering what could happen if we planted it, if we touched the very outer edge of his movement, if we risked meeting him, returning his gaze and risked saying, yes it was me who touched the very edge of you – because I couldn't believe there was a place for me, but couldn't not believe it either. So I just spread my wings and went with abandon. I believe; help my unbelief.

So here's what Mary Oliver learns from "Wild Geese" –

You do not have to be good.  
 You do not have to walk on your knees  
 for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
 You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
     love what it loves.  
 Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
 Meanwhile the world goes on.  
 Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
 are moving across the landscapes,  
 over the prairies and the deep trees,  
 the mountains and the rivers.  
 Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clear blue air,  
 are heading home again.  
 Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
 the world offers itself to your imagination,  
 calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting--  
 over and over announcing your place  
 in the family of things.

So you pull on your cloak, touch your own bandages, whatever they cover or staunch, adjust your scarf, head out into the light of day, down the road, clear in the ancient faith. Abandon holds you to your way, as in love or sleep. What you need is here: whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination – calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting – over and over announcing your place – *your place* – *your place* – in the family of things.