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The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

Approaching Christ in Faith

I'm not sure there is another lectionary text that encapsulates the absolutely radical nature of Jesus' ministry the way today's excerpts from Matthew do

First the call of Matthew to become Jesus' disciple: "As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples"

And, then, while the raising of the Synagogue leader's child is an important story, I'm pointing us toward the bleeding woman this morning: "suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.' Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, 'Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.' And instantly the woman was made well."

Jesus didn't call the most pious to be his disciples, thank goodness – or he certainly didn't let their jobs determine their worthiness of being his most dear friends – and his table ministry, who he ate with on a regular basis, shocked both religious and community leaders in his day and probably would still today: tax collectors and sinners!

Heck, I'm still a little leery of my CPA

And a person, who for so many reasons should have hidden herself away, namely that she was a woman and she was bleeding, boldly and rather blatantly approaches the Messiah and touches his cloak, for which she is not shunned or stoned, rather she is recognized for her faith and made well

Jesus walked into town and went directly to the margins – to the edges of the community where the centrifugal force of community norms fling their leftovers and their left-outs

And it is from the margins that a daring bleeding woman braves the force of that spiral and approaches the Savior

“So it may be with the church’s ministry,” writes Greg Carey, Professor of New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary (PA), “sometimes we go forth and identify ourselves with those on the margins; in other cases the needs of others draw the church beyond its comfortable boundaries.”¹

I think we as a Church have a good grasp on Jesus’ call to identify ourselves with those on the margins – and I mean “we” as in the St. Bart’s community and The Episcopal Church and other mainline denominations, too

Churches across the nation are the leading providers of care to those for whom our society provides little or not enough

Jubilee Centers, food pantries – when Bishop Brown came to our “What’s an Episcopalian?” class, he said that every church in the Diocese of Maine is engaged in some sort of food ministry like a pantry or soup kitchen, *every one!*

And, many churches understand, as Jesus did, that so many on the margins aren’t just desperate for immediate help with their daily needs, but they also require more just systems in our societies

They need our advocacy, they need true allyship and I think many churches work hard at this in their ministries – including St. Bart’s

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-10/commentary-on-matthew-99-13-18-26>

Our congregation doesn't sit at the margins of society, but we've discerned many ways to engage in ministry on the margins as Jesus has called us to do

But, what about the bleeding woman?

As churches, we often go out to the margins in the ways we are comfortable with and know how to in order to fulfill our calling as Jesus' disciples, but how do we as a church body react to the margins coming to us to "draw the church beyond its comfortable boundaries" as Professor Carey suggested?

This has been a trickier history in the church, but no less important

As this is the second Sunday in a month-long celebration of Queer Pride, I think the story of queer peoples' relationship with the church is an important example of the bleeding woman

For so long, the identities of queer people were othered and diminished by the Church – the centrifugal force of faith norms threw our community to the edges and the force of that spiral was immense

But, thanks be to God it did not keep queer people from having deep, abiding faith

As I've mentioned before, my call previous to being here at St. Bart's was to a non-profit called Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries (ELM) whose mission is to organize queer seminarians and rostered ministers (which is how the Lutheran church refers to clergy), confront barriers and systemic oppression, and activate queer ideas and movements within the Lutheran Church.

But the organization started just over 30 years ago as a movement of queer people approaching the Church seeking to be made well by asking to be allowed to be pastors and to serve openly, but the Church said "no"

I should say that by “Church” here I mean the institutional church, the denomination

Just as there is a force when spinning that flings objects to the edges, there is also a force when spinning that holds things tightly in the center

In the late 80’s and early 90’s, the only path to being a pastor in the Lutheran Church for the LGBTQIA+ community was to be closeted and single.

But the greater church – the body of Christ – lay leaders and pastors in local settings radically said “yes!”

Two churches in San Francisco boldly defied the denomination’s rules and illegally ordained a cis-white gay man and a cis-white lesbian couple

The ordination was held in the biggest Lutheran church in the city and was attended by thousands of people in-person with satellite receptions in 6 other cities all listening in via a radio broadcast (oh the 90’s! the days before Zoom and streaming)

Jeff, Ruth, and Phyllis were ordained that day and a movement in the church amplified

Over the next 20 years, Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries would ordain almost 20 more individuals who identified as queer and became a place where queer pastors who came out and were kicked out of the Lutheran Church could land and keep their ordination status

By 2009, there were almost 50 ministers associated with ELM – serving in communities across the United States

In 2009, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) – the denomination in which I am ordained – changed its rules to allow queer

people who are publically out and partnered to serve as clergy in the church

20 years after those illegal ordinations and almost two millennia of faithful perseverance by the queer community

Queer people have served in the church since the Church's inception and have sat in it's pews – often closeted and at the risk of significant harm to their person

But the truth of the love of God poured out in the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Christ has no less been true for and to them

And so the queer community continued to seek out Jesus if only to touch his cloak – for, you see, the queer community is bleeding and has been for a long time: losing that life-force which sustains all humans but which is hemorrhaging from the queer community in the form of hatred and ostracization, ignorance and violence

It takes a bold faith, in the face of circumstances such as these, to continue to believe that you are loved, that the God who created the heavens and the earth is still on your side amidst the rhetoric and restrictions

In faith, the queer community approached the church decade after decade to touch Jesus' cloak and, thanks be to God, their faith has made them well and the Church of God is coming around

Some churches, like St. Bart's, are brave and safe spaces of love, acceptance, wholeness, and vulnerability – which is so needed because my queer community is still bleeding in the form of anti-trans laws, horrific bullying, and continued lack of support and understanding in families and communities around the nation and in our backyards

But, so I ask you: Who are the bleeding women today – approaching the Church, both the institution and us as a local community – who by faith

know reconciliation and harmony are possible if we but turn our heads and notice them touching our cloak?

For Jesus recognized it was not he who legitimized the bleeding woman, her faith made her well – she was right from the onset that she was a beloved child of God and that she was worthy of being well

Certainly the queer community continues to reach out to us, who else is drawing the church beyond its comfortable boundaries?

Let us not assume we know who is reaching out to touch our cloak, rather let us, like Jesus, radically turn and look and listen.

Amen.