

Beyond Binary

Scripture Reading: Luke 8:43-48

Hi. I'm Pastor Laurie, and my pronouns are she/her. I'm a cisgender female. I want you to hear in no uncertain terms, from this place, from this pulpit, how incredibly important you are. That your full truth is welcome here. That the church, this church, these followers of Jesus Christ – see you and love you and want to know you. Please know that you are always welcome to tell me your pronouns, or correct me if I misgender you, and I will use your correct pronouns. If you have no idea what I'm talking about, that's okay, please hang in there, because we are on this journey together and we absolutely need you with us.

Let me stop and back up and give a little public service announcement here. This sermon is a bit messy. There is so much happening in this passage of scripture, and it's all so devastatingly important. This sermon's also going to be a bit biological. In fact, I'm going to commit the cardinal sin of being a U.S. protestant – and admit, from the pulpit, that we have bodies. Messy, glorious, powerful, problematic, finite bodies. We do. I do. You do. Some of our bodies are able to do exactly what we would like them to do. Some of us are differently abled, or disabled. Some of us menstruate. Some of us do not. Some of us can or have had babies, some of us cannot or have not. Some of us don't want to. Some of us identify as women, and our physiology does not reflect identity. Some of us identify as women, and our physiology doesn't match that identity. And so on and so on and so on, an entire rainbow of possibilities in the spectrum of the human experience. Oh thank God for our bodies.

Yet, as a great generality, we don't talk about them in church. We talk about it when our bodies start to break down, for sure. When we are sick, or injured in some way, we pray for one another in vague and dignity preserving ways. We acknowledge birth and we acknowledge death. But we don't tend to spend a lot of time celebrating or honoring or even understanding the amazing, wild, wonderful thing that is having a corporeal form! And you simply cannot talk about the woman with the twelve year issue of blood without talking about bodies, or without talking about menstruation.

Women are extraordinary and bodies are amazing. Every single one of them. If we were fully conscious of how ridiculously wonderful our bodies are, we wouldn't get anything else done. We'd just be in perpetual awe.

Now the woman in today's scripture, her body was undergoing pain. We can only guess at how she felt, likely pretty awful before she met up with Jesus. She is experiencing something deeply unusual, a story that appears in the Gospels of Matthew, and Mark, and Luke. Biblical historians tend to agree that this "twelve-year issue of blood" is, of course, a reference to menstruation. Twelve years of non-stop menstruation is an incredibly serious malady – it would be today just as much as it was then and there. None of the doctors could help her as she wrestled with both physical challenges – she was almost certainly anemic, and would have had all kinds of health complications, not to mention the psychological impacts of severe social stigma.

For women of the time, menstruation was enough to mark one as ritually unclean, and therefore render her socially and religiously isolated. The status of being ceremonially unclean lasted for seven days after the flow of blood ended, and, from what we know, this woman never got a break. This woman would have been forbidden from attending religious ceremonies, spending time with others, or getting married. For twelve years. Shame and isolation take a toll on the psyche, and the taboo of female biology has harmed too many for too long to not bring it into the light. Which is just what Christ did. Which God is doing still.

All over the world today even a “standard” 28 day cycle is consistently a source of shame, treated as something to be kept secretive. There are whole marketing campaigns built on the discretion of certain feminine hygiene products, as if keeping shame intact is a real selling point. Our siblings in our Kenya partnership have gratefully received your generous gifts of sanitary pads and other hygiene items so girls can continue to go to school once their periods start.

Our partner Mildred informs us that First Congo “has played a big role in raising the hearts of girls at Sambalat Primary school because initially they were using old blankets and other rags that were very dirty and could cause infections. Therefore, apart from paying fees, *this* is of paramount to a girl child for it goes hand in hand with her education and fulfillment of her dreams.” The ubiquitous taboo against the biological fact of menstruation is a cross-cultural, multi-millennia phenomenon that is wildly destructive. And it is rooted in the harsh constructs of hierarchy and binary, which sort us all into one of two roles, female or male, and insists that to be female is to be lesser. Enough.

Now if you come from a similar background to my own, these are private things we do not talk about in public. And sometimes things are private for good reason. But sometimes things are private because we are so conditioned to shame that we do not even question how genuinely bizarre it is that a physical aspect of half the bodies on the planet is considered unspeakable. Like most justice needs, harm intersects, with multiple injustices harming the same populations over and over again.

Over 210,000 women are homeless in the U.S. right now, and finding adequate supplies to hygienically manage their bodily needs is a relentless struggle. Enough.

Our imprisoned sisters, all 219,000 of them, face a similarly humiliating challenge, consistently given insufficient tampons or pads, or charged exorbitantly for their use on tightly regulated schedules. It is more than bad policy or poorly understood funding priorities. It is a tactic of abuse, control, and humiliation. Kimberley Haven, while serving a 15 month sentence, endured toxic shock syndrome and a subsequent hysterectomy from using makeshift menstrual products when she was denied adequate supplies, a scenario replicated over and over by women across the country. Enough. And I think Jesus would say “enough” too.

A former Arizona Department of Corrections inmate put it this way. She said: “Something crazy happens when you start treating people like people: They start acting like it.”

So I don’t know if this morning’s story of Christ’s healing this woman is really about any kind of physical transformation. Sure, that happens and is a piece of the story, but Jesus healed lots of people. What makes this woman so special? What makes her and this moment extraordinary, in the Gospel and in the world, is that Christ believes her about her own body. What a radical, extravagant, healing, and holy gift to give anyone.

Jesus does not consider our bodies or our bodily experiences to be unspeakable. Jesus does the radical thing of empathizing with someone enduring an experience he would never understand in his own body.

He honors the truth of the bodies around him. And I have to believe that, as every woman shares her own story of being dismissed and harmed and forever changed by treatment endured solely because she is a woman, when every woman whispers her own words into the night ‘yep. Me too.’ ...That Christ hears her, and believes her, and cares about her body too.

Believing people about their bodies saves lives.

Believing lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people – especially teenagers - and affirming their knowledge of themselves can radically reduce self-harm, and lowers suicide risk in a

population that attempts suicide at nearly ten times the rate of their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts.

Believing women, and especially women of color, about their experiences of physical pain increases appropriate medical care and can lower the thousands of annual cases in this country where women report being under treated and having their pain ignored.

Believing people about their bodies is harm reduction. In situations of abuse, in the lived realities of rape culture, in the ways that remind us that each experience is more than a statistic. It is a life.

Believing people about their own bodies saves lives. And it is as radical an act of sacred and necessary love as any miracle performed by Christ. It says: it is enough. You are enough.

Christ's loving belief signals to us the kind of life God wants each of us to have. One that includes being seen and heard and known and loved and whole. One that includes one of my absolute favorite phrases of the moment – gender euphoria. It refers to the sense of finding your truest self reflected to you by what you see in the mirror, how your clothes fit you, the space you occupy in the world. If you've ever put on a dress for the first time in ages, or ever, and thought wow, there I am. If you've ever had the revelation that shirts designed for men just suit you better. If you've ever found the way of walking or sitting or being or speaking that is both new to you and just like coming home. The lightness of being comfortable in your own skin because you know who you are and now maybe the rest of the world can too. That, my friends, is gender euphoria. The hallelujah of knowing yourself.

That is the gift that I imagine Christ is giving this woman and to all of us. Freedom from the bondage of human binaries. Binaries are the yes or no ways of thinking. Black or white. Male or Female. Slave or free. And yet in Christ, we are so much more than any one category, more diverse than any dichotomy. Binary just isn't enough for God, and it's not enough for God's children.

Binary thinking is just too small. It's code, it's conditioning, it's getting locked into spaces where there is only one, or the other, instead of the multiplicity of experiences that God creates and provides for their beloved children.

When the woman has received her healing from her savior, she senses an immediate change. And when she falls at Christ's feet, what does she do? *She declares in the presence of all the people why she had touched him.* She tells her whole gritty truth, her deeply human experience of her body's hurt. Her need. And he sees her in that need. He is not afraid of what her body is or can do. He doesn't ask her to spare him the details.

Friends, let us follow the path of Christ, and be more than tolerant, to move beyond the boundary of binaries, because in the practice and life of Jesus Christ we have been given the key to life well lived. That is, to always love more.

God is never about less. God is about more, an expansive kind of love that grows and includes and overwhelms. God sees you. God loves you. And God knows you are enough.