

Service 3

Finding Our Way toward Healing

FOCUS STATEMENT

In the midst of lament, it can be difficult for us to believe that healing is possible. This story about a bleeding woman and a sick girl moves from lament toward healing, revealing that God hears our cries, cares deeply for our pain, and offers the possibility for new life. This is a story of hope and assurance. The bleeding woman makes a bold move of faith in order to be healed. She reaches up and takes the healing she needs from Jesus without explicit permission. Surrounding the woman's action is the story of a young girl also in need of physical restoration. In this story, Jesus takes full initiative to heal the girl. Like the woman who sought Jesus' touch, we too are active agents in our own healing. Like the girl Jesus healed, we remember that healing is a gift from God.

GATHERING

Call to Worship

*Loving God, we are told that you are a healer.
We are told that you comfort those who mourn
and bring justice to the oppressed.
The oppressed are here among us.
In one way or another we are a people in pain.
Open our eyes to your way of healing.
Teach us to believe in the possibility of new life.
Give us hope.*

Give us energy.

Give us strength.

Fill our lungs with new breath so that we are rested, renewed, and ready to stand and claim your healing power for our own lives and for the liberation of the world. Amen.

Consider also:

Hymnal: A Worship Book #732

Hymnal: A Worship Book #801

Sing the Journey #120

Sing the Journey #130

CONFESSION & ASSURANCE

God in whose image we are formed,

numerous are the ways we've learned to cope with the hurt we feel.

We distract ourselves with work or play.

We direct our attention toward the needs of others rather than acknowledging our own.

We self-medicate, hoping that indulgence will dress our wounds.

We lash out, wanting the responsibility for our healing to land on someone else's shoulders.

The hardest thing to do is to be still and let our pain be what it is.

We are afraid that in doing this our feelings may swallow us.

We are afraid that they may never give way to peace.

We are afraid that if we allow ourselves to give voice to our fear and sadness, we may find out that we are vulnerable and alone.

God of grace, forgive us for finding it difficult to trust in the possibility of healing.

Calm our fears, take us by the hand, and lead us to peace.

(Pause.)

Be assured that no matter the force of the pain you carry, healing is possible. There are sisters and brothers here willing to support you in your journey. Our loving God will guide and protect your path. Amen.

SCRIPTURE

Mark 5:21-43: Consider sharing the following monologue based on this text. The reflection in Studying the Word & sharing our stories is based on this monologue.

I am a woman and, praise God, my spirit has been restored. As a little girl, my spirit was strong. It rushed and played and reached and loved and was at rest in the arms of God. As a little girl my spirit was created beautifully, tenderly, abundantly, strong—until it wasn't.

Like a disease that takes life from the body, my spirit was stolen from me. And it wasn't my fault. I was just a little girl. Helpless like those who lie sick in bed my little girl eyes watched as the spirit of life in me was swept away. I panicked. I cried out for help. Those who loved me cried out to Jesus for help on my behalf, and Jesus, this grand and glorious Jesus, turned toward me, set his gaze upon me, and decided to come to my aid.

I know he really wanted to help, but it was too late. I was just a little girl. My spirit was stolen from me, as if by a disease. No fault of my own. And I died.

Years went by, one year after the next. The pain of death stayed with me, but life goes on. People have to eat and sleep and clean and work, and that's what I did. You would be surprised at how easy it is to ignore death—except, when it's not.

I carried death's pain with me, and I tried to hide it, but it's as if the experience left gaping wounds on my body. No matter how much I wanted to deny it, I was wounded and bleeding perpetually. That's not really . . . hide-able. Maybe people around me didn't know exactly what was wrong, but they certainly knew something wasn't right, and it made me strange, broken. It made me less on every account. Not only to others, but I believed it too. But it wasn't my fault. My spirit was stolen from me! I died, and I had only been a little girl.

I had no life to start with, and the pain of constant bleeding from my soul drove me to desperation. I tried everything and spent my last dime in the process. I tried every remedy recommended and then every remedy not-so-recommended, too. Nothing helped. No one helped. I had nothing left, and I so desperately wanted my life back.

People do questionable things when they have nothing left to lose. One day, I saw Jesus. I remembered that this person who claimed to

have healing power had turned toward me when I was in such trouble as a little girl. He had cared about me then. I can't really explain why, but I knew that there was something about this person that offered hope. If I could just get close to him . . .

Important people huddled all around Jesus: people who were respectable, people who deserved to spend time with him, people who hadn't tried all of those not-so-recommended remedies. But I just didn't care. For the first time in a very long time I dared to believe that my needs mattered: to him, to myself, and most importantly, to God. So I just did it! I walked up behind Jesus, and I touched him. I took what I needed to be well.

You know what it's like to touch someone. It's sacred. That thing in us that makes us created in God's image moves through us through touch. When I gave myself the gifts of love and respect by daring to touch Jesus without permission, chains I didn't even know I had broke and fell to the floor. The life that had been bleeding out of me for so many years . . . stopped. My shame and my guilt left me. Those voices screaming, "You're not good enough," "You are sick!" "You don't matter," fell silent. I closed my eyes and breathed in my first full breath of life since I was that little girl.

Jesus knew someone had touched him. He had felt me take healing power from him. The others were all standoffish about the whole matter, but I heard Jesus calling for me, and I came forward. Yes, I was trembling but not out of fear! Like a prisoner released from behind the bars of a life sentence, I was trembling because I was finally and unexpectedly free. I was alive. I had survived. And I told everyone. Jesus smiled and congratulated me, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

So many years ago, when Jesus turned toward me as I lay there dying, I thought he had been too late. My spirit was stolen from me, and Jesus did not prevent me from dying. But I can see now that, as I bled in my life of death for so many years, Jesus never stopped walking toward me. And that day he had finally reached my side. Or perhaps that was the day that I finally noticed him next to me.

I was healed. I had been just a little girl; it wasn't my fault. My spirit was stolen from me, and I laid down and died. But Jesus walked to where I lay, stood next to me, and said, "Child, get up!" He didn't pick me up. He knew that to truly live I had to decide to stand. I had to reach out and touch him on my own, take my life back for myself. And yet, it was Jesus who showed me I could choose to save myself. At

those words, “Child, get up,” I walked forward, I touched him, took the healing I needed, and my spirit returned.

I am a woman, praise God; my spirit has been restored.

STUDYING THE WORD & SHARING OUR STORIES

This text is rich and multivalent, with a number of acceptable and helpful interpretations. Some have noticed that Christian survivors of sexualized violence, particularly women, can often connect with this biblical story in a powerful way. More than that, it is a story that leads to meaningful insight about what a process of healing from systemic patriarchy might look like. The creative interpretation of the text in this resource demonstrates how the story can be read as a tool for healing. This interpretation is designed as a monologue, spoken from the perspective of both the woman and the girl of the text. You will notice that in this monologue the woman and the girl are the same person.

In this interpretation of the text, healing begins when the bleeding woman, “dare[s] to believe that [her] needs mattered: to [Jesus], to [her-self], and most importantly to God.” Patriarchy sends women the message that they are fundamentally flawed or inferior. Finding the courage to silence those messages and give oneself the “gift of love and respect” is an essential first step toward healing because the reach of injustice goes beyond what happens to outer, material things like bodies, land, and belongings. Injustice has the power to take possession of and injure a person’s inward faculties—the psychological self, the emotional self, the spiritual self.

The second step toward healing is taking for oneself what is needed for healing and justice. As soon as the woman dares to believe that she matters, she walks up behind Jesus, touches his clothes, and takes some kind of power from him. She must have pushed her way through the crowds surrounding Jesus, many of whom likely desired some kind of healing from him as well. She doesn’t wait in line but asserts her own needs even as the needs of others were evident. Note also that the woman takes this power from Jesus before he even knows what happens. The woman does not have his explicit permission, and the fact that she was ill with perpetual bleeding meant that touching Jesus would cause him to become ritually unclean. She does it anyway. And it is this behavior, this self-interested, bold action in

which the woman of the text takes what she needs without permission, that brings about her immediate healing. Her bleeding stops. Jesus congratulates her, affirms her audacious behavior, and gives her credit for her healing, saying, “Daughter, your faith has made you well.”

Taking is not always helpful. We don’t want to affirm the kind of taking that perpetuates violence and oppression, and yet there is clearly something about taking in this context that is good, helpful, and just. Why is taking significant? A common dynamic in oppression, injustice, and sexualized violence is that control is exercised over the oppressed, who are denied the right or ability to determine their own futures. A significant amount of the trauma caused by this kind of injustice is directly related to the experience of being denied a say in the path one’s own life will take or the way one’s own body is used. This means that justice and healing are also intimately related to (but not dependent on) one’s ability to regain a healthy degree of control over self. In the writer’s interpretation, taking power from Jesus represents the woman’s resistance to the notion that others should be able to determine whether or not she has access to healing and justice. She asserts her inherent worth as a created being in radical protest against the systems of oppression that insist she is worthless. Bold, brash, self-interested taking can be an important and faithful step toward justice.

A third element that encourages healing is the description of the woman’s relationship with Jesus as a partnership. They each play a different role but work together toward the same goal. The woman’s final step toward healing is her realization that justice and healing are what Jesus wanted for her all along. The effects of the first two ways she experiences healing are deepened and made secure by the assurance that her worth is also affirmed and protected by God.

REFLECTING & RESPONDING

Large or small group: Invite participants into a time of anointing. Consider using these words in your invitation:

In the ancient world, oil was considered a necessity of daily life. It was an aid in the preparation of nourishing food. It was used as fuel for lamps that provided light in the darkness. And, it was known to have healing properties that could soothe the distressed and cure the sick. In our service today,

this oil is a sign of God's care for you and God's intention to walk with you toward healing. May it give you strength.

Make a smudge with oil on the forehead of each who comes forward, and speak these words:

I/We anoint you with healing oil. May you be granted peace.

For smaller groups: Consider inviting participants to anoint one another rather than designating one or two people to provide anointing for the whole group.

SENDING BLESSING

Go from here ready to extend your hand. May you have the boldness to believe that healing is within reach.

SONG SUGGESTIONS

O healing river (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #372)
Heal us, Immanuel, here we are (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #375)
Healer of our every ill (*Hymnal: A Worship Book* #377)
You are all we have (*Sing the Journey* #29)
As tranquil streams (*Sing the Journey* #51)
Alleluia, the great storm is over (*Sing the Journey* #71)
What does the Lord require of you? (*Sing the Story* #54)

VISUAL SUGGESTIONS

The visual for this service is related to the reading of the monologue and the act of anointing. If you are not planning to include either of these elements, adapt the visual accordingly.

On a table in the center of the worship space or at the front of the room, place a vase of wilted flowers. Around the vase, arrange several lit candles and dishes of oil for anointing. At the end of the monologue, replace the vase of wilted flowers with a vase of vibrant, living flowers to communicate transformation and healing. Use the dishes of oil for anointing.