

Alone No More, Silent No More: A Sermon on Sexual Abuse by Rev. Sarah Marsh

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." So he went with him. And a large crowd followed him 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 around 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 5:21 -34).

There is something striking about this woman. I can only imagine how she might have been feeling, as she had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. She had spent all of her money on doctors and hadn't gotten any better. Her gynecological bleeding left her ritually unclean, for according to Jewish law, women who were menstruating were not allowed to participate in religious and social life. This woman, therefore, was an outcast from all religious and social occasions, and had been so for over a decade. Surrounded by the crowds following Jesus, she is still completely alone. She feels dirty. She feels like an outcast. She feels desperate. Overwhelmed with her shame, she cannot bear to face Jesus, but instead comes up behind him, reaches out her hand and touches his cloak.

There are those in the crowd who do not think this woman should be touching Jesus. She is unclean, he is holy. They want to protect him from being defiled. Against such pressure, this woman has the courage to reach out in faith.

This woman knows what it is to feel shame. To feel bad, not just about what she has done, but about who she is. The burden she carries is great. This woman is not alone. There are many today who also carry the burden of shame. It is a burden that is too heavy, as they confess and confess their sins but still cannot accept God's forgiveness, cannot believe that God would love one such as them. They truly believe that they are unlovable and unworthy. People who have been abused often carry this type of shame, for what they experience distorts their view of self. People who have been sexually abused often experience similarities to this hemorrhaging woman. In this sermon today, I would like to talk about some of the parallels between the experience of this woman and those who have been sexually abused, both male and female.

Victims of abuse feel dirty and ashamed. Somehow they blame themselves for this terrible thing that happened to them. They may see it as their fault. But it is not their fault! Certainly we would never say to this woman, "It is your fault you are hemorrhaging." And certainly what has happened is not the victim's fault either. And yet, they carry this shame and thus blame themselves.

Victims of sexual abuse often feel powerless and hopeless. They can have trouble with intimacy, and trust can be difficult, because they have had to put up walls to protect themselves. The people who should have been protecting them have violated their trust.

Sadly, those who have been sexually abused often feel all alone--alone with their secret, alone in their experience, alone and unwelcome. There are too many stories of children who have tried to share their experience and have not been believed or have been silenced. Sometimes, the threats of the abuser silence the victim, who then carries this deep, dark secret alone and in silence. Other times, the victim may not be able to reach out for help because of the incredible amount of self-loathing they experience. It is not simply that they have no one to hear their story, but there also is a voice in their head that tells them that if anyone did listen to them, the listener would not care. Victims of abuse feel they do not deserve to be heard or to receive compassion. This too, is part of the burden and pain that victims of abuse bear. Their self concept has been broken and distorted.

Meanwhile, the church has been silent for too long. The truth of sexual abuse makes us uncomfortable. Even here, where of all places one should be able to seek healing, it may not feel safe to tell. Is it possible that we have unknowingly communicated the message, "You're unclean and this place is holy; do not disturb our peace?" We must make this a safe place to tell. For the modern version of this woman is all around us. She is not alone. Before the age of eighteen, one in three girls and one in seven boys are sexually abused. The abuse victim is not alone. She may be our wife, our sister, our brother, our friend, our neighbor, the person with the cubicle next to ours. She may be any one of us. She is not alone, but she is in need of healing. And we can learn a great deal about how to help her by looking at Jesus' response to the woman in our story.

Jesus does not ignore this woman. He does not hurry on his way to heal the daughter of the religious official. No, noticing that power has gone out from him, he stops, and asks who has touched him. Jesus does not view this woman as unclean. He loves her. He also respects her. He respects her privacy and her distance, and her courage in coming forward. He does not interrogate her, but offers her the chance to tell her story. And as she comes before him, he calls her "daughter," affirms her faith, and wishes her peace. What happens in this encounter is far more than a physical healing. Jesus restores her, i.e., restores her place in the community, and restores her sense of self.

I can only imagine what it must have been like to be this woman, who for twelve long years had suffered physically and emotionally, who was alone and desperate and who reached out in faith for healing. Who knelt there in front of Jesus. To feel in her body that she had been healed, but to know in her heart that something far greater was taking place, as he looked at her and called her daughter. That Jesus, who could look into her eyes and know everything about her, looked at her with such love and compassion.

Jesus Christ looks at all those who have been sexually abused with love and compassion. He knows what it is to suffer unjustly, and his heart breaks for his children. And he calls them to come and be healed. To come and rest in his arms of love, to find shelter and security, and strength. Strength and courage to face the past, the future, and the journey towards healing. Hope that in his goodness all things can be restored. You can be restored. You will again be whole. You do not have to face this by yourself.

In the poem entitled, "I remember", by Ann Campbell, she describes her memories of her abuse, and her prayers for Christ's healing:

I remember things, Lord,
And I hurt all over again.
A quivering child,
Monstrous hands
Grasping-groping
Muffled cries pleading with the darkness,
Stab through me
Bringing memories
Like gaping wounds.
I hurt all over again.
Heal me, Lord.
Wash my wound away
As rain gently cleanses
The dust
From the flower,
That I might be healed
And full of your glory

One of the most important steps towards healing for those who have been sexually abused is the ability to tell their story. To be believed. To know that they are safe and loved. To be alone no more; to be silent no more. I pray that this church will be a place where those who have been sexually abused will be safe to tell their story, and that those who have a story to tell, will find the courage to tell it. I pray that we the church, like Jesus, will look around to see who it is that is reaching out for healing. Even more, I pray that we will bear witness to a Savior who loves these men and women beyond what they could ever imagine and provide hope that in the arms of Christ, they can find healing and restoration.

Rev. Sarah Marsh is an ordained minister in the PC(USA).