

**Christian Healing, Sermon three: Rev. Wendy Sellers, Sunday 29 September**  
*(Readings: Acts 5. 12-16; Luke 8. 43-48)*

I apologise in advance for any words in this sermon which offend anyone. It was just impossible to discuss today's Gospel without using some words not often used in social situations, never mind church. You have been warned!

Let's start with a story.

When I was coming towards the end of primary school, the girls in my class and their mums received a summons to a meeting with the school nurse. When we got there, the nurse explained about the female reproductive system, using a large poster showing the womb and ovaries. She talked about periods and waved around a sanitary towel the size of a small pillow, which you apparently attached to yourself using some kind of harness.

On the way home, mum asked, 'Wendy, where in your body do you think those bits shown on the poster actually are?' I hazarded a guess at my ear! Thank goodness mum checked.

Functions specific to women's bodies have been, and remain in many societies, taboo or, at the very least, embarrassing. They are seldom discussed. They are considered, frankly, a bit yucky. Yet, of course, without them, the human race would quickly fade away.

We have come a long way in our culture, but we also have some way to go.

It is only two years ago that a sanitary wear company decided to show actual blood, instead of a blue liquid, in their TV adverts – causing a huge backlash.

And when the priesting of women in the Church of England was debated less than 30 years ago, it was suggested women might defile the sanctuary or the sacrament if they were menstruating.

Now, if we still have such a complex relationship with female biology – what must it have been like to be the woman featured in today's healing miracle? The 'haemorrhaging' woman, as she is commonly and unfortunately known.

There was no effective medical help for her condition, indeed her 12-year search for a cure had impoverished her. Even today, being subject to constant bleeding takes serious medical investigation to understand the cause. And while you are undergoing investigation you may, quite possibly, choose not to tell anyone, because it is embarrassing and personal.

Yet, everyone knows about the woman we heard about today – because she would have no effective way of hiding the blood. She also would have felt ill and weak, humans are not designed to bleed constantly. She would be anaemic and this would put stress on her heart. So, she's poor and she's ill.

Yet harder still would be the fact that for the Jews, blood was unclean. You didn't touch blood unless you were willing to undergo ritual cleansing. Women would have stayed at home both during their period and the week after (that's half their adult lives), as well as after childbirth: this kept all the blood safely out of sight and mind and, most importantly, contact with men.

This woman had suffered years of this. Of being unclean. Of being untouchable. I think the exclusion from society, and particularly the exclusion

from any form of religious expression, must have been as painful as whatever she physically suffered.

And then what does that religious exclusion suggest to that unfortunate woman about the nature of God? Perhaps she thought God hated all women – after all, bleeding is part of being female. To a Jew, and actually for many Christians since, too, it was a sign of God's displeasure for Eve's activities in the Garden of Eden. It was a punishment.

Perhaps this woman even felt that God hated her in particular – that she had done something to separate herself permanently from God. Otherwise, why was she haemorrhaging constantly?

Amazingly, the woman has kept faith through all her troubles. And that faith brings her into contact with Jesus Christ. That faith brings her out of her home, out of the shadows, into a busy street. She joins a crowd of people and, by doing so, risks everything. Remember, no one wants to touch her. She should keep away from others, especially from a Rabbi. But her faith forces her outside.

The woman puts out her hand and touches the cloak of Jesus. And he feels the power go out of him. We learn that this, and presumably every healing, carried a cost for him. He had to give up something of himself for the healing to work. The power went out of him: from him to her. Healing, it seems, has a cost to the healer.

Jesus needed his power, of course – he was on his way to raise a child from the dead. Yet he gave his power to save this poor woman.

He also gave his time. Time was short – Jesus was on his way to Jarius' house and needed to get there quickly. Yet he stopped to talk to this woman. To affirm her humanity and importance. To make sure everyone knew she was cured – for only if that was public knowledge could she reclaim her place in society.

And Jesus stopped to make sure she understood that it was her faith that had made this happen. If she had stayed at home in fear, she would never have been cured.

And Jesus, crucially, acknowledged the existence and, indeed, importance of an untouchable. So many of his healings involve the marginalised. Jesus touched the untouchables, showing that with God there is no such thing.

The healing of the haemorrhaging woman tells the story of a woman who is not whole, but becomes so, after an encounter with Jesus. She is indeed physically cured – but in her case that physical cure was necessary to allow her to take her place in society and in her religion. The bleeding prohibited that.

But the wholeness comes from the fact that the stigma has been removed. And while it was her faith that brought her into contact with Jesus, it was God's power that healed her.

So why is the story of the haemorrhaging woman important?

It does teach us that faith may get us into a place where we are closer to wholeness. It may take faith to talk to someone about your health concerns, to book an appointment, to Google your symptoms. It may take faith to endure investigations and treatment – to trust in others and let them help. It may take

faith to accept there is no physical cure. It takes faith, always, to dare to reach out to Jesus.

Secondly, I do believe this story affirms the importance of women to God – our bodies do not make us substandard or unclean. When we suffer and bleed, God is with us.

Then, I believe this story reminds us that healing has a cost, even for God. Miraculous healing goes against the natural order and for that it seems God has to pay a price. Perhaps that is why it is so rare. Maybe it is a glimpse of what the kingdom of God will look like, when it is finally completely realised.

And perhaps most importantly, I believe it tells us that wholeness is the thing we all are striving for. A woman can be both whole and haemorrhaging. A man might be paralysed yet forgiven and whole.

Wholeness means not that our physical or mental struggles are ignored, but they are not the measure by which we are judged. Many people with illness or disability would see themselves as whole. Many healthy people would not.

Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has made you well, go in peace”. In Greek the word for ‘well’ might mean ‘healed’ or ‘saved’. The woman’s faith has brought her wellness and salvation. It also brought her a cure, but that actually is of secondary importance.