

The Touch Of The Untouchable

A Re-reading of Luke 8: 42b-48

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Abstract: Religion has not only been the root cause of dehumanization of women through its oppressive laws and teachings, but has also been its perpetuating force. The Scriptures are a product of an androcentric patriarchal culture and history. In this article, based on Luke 8:42b-48 we reflect on Jesus' liberating treatment of women. The first part will articulate the existential situation of women in Jesus' day and in the Indian context the questions raised within it. We shall restrict our exposure of women's status to the menstrual taboos imposed by religion and related social customs that deprive women of full humanhood. The second part will introduce the narrative analysis of the passage and elucidate its meaning and message.

Keywords: Untouchable, interpretation of scriptures, women in the Bible, androcentrism, women and Church.

There is a growing consciousness of gender injustice plaguing our society. This is evident in the upsurge of many women's movements and organizations. Women are beginning to hear their inner voice crying for freedom. Their silenced voice is finding expression and their hidden person is seeking visibility. Women are making a successful breakthrough in the once male-dominated domain of politics, science and technology. However, the vast majority of women are still victims of the exploitative socio-cultural system. Women have not yet made bold to enter the realm of religion that legitimizes and perpetuates their marginalization.

Religion has not only been the root cause of dehumanization of women through its oppressive laws and teachings, but has also been its perpetuating force. The Scriptures like the *Manusmriti*, *Koran*, and *The Bible* are a product of an androcentric patriarchal culture

and history. Scholars with their biased male perspective have often overlooked this oppressive aspect when interpreting scriptural passages. They have failed to articulate women's experience of the divine and include the place and contribution of women in God's plan of salvation. Several women theologians have attempted to 'liberate' the Scriptures from androcentrism by re-reading and re-interpreting the texts and tried to reconstruct history by reclaiming the lost and forgotten heritage of women. This is one such attempt.

The injustice meted out to women due to menstrual taboos imposed by religion and society has motivated me to make a critical study of the episode of the woman with the flow of blood (Lk 8:42b-48). My approach will be hermeneutical because the reader or interpreter always approaches the text with searching questions from one's existential experience. To interpret means to make understandable and this in turn presupposes an understanding (Bultmann 1961: 292). There cannot be any such thing as pre-suppositionless analysis of a text.

The episode, at first glance, appears to be a dramatic narration of the healing of a woman with the flow of blood. The passage is often referred to as the 'intercalated story' or the 'sandwiched episode', thus limiting its importance to a mere 'stop-gap' incident placed within the story of Jairus' dying daughter. Furthermore, most of the exegetes have tagged it as a 'healing' or 'miracle' episode expounding the faith of the "touch of a hand." A close reading of the text of this faith-healing story also reveals a liberative significance for the women – Theophilus of today.

Our reflection of Luke 8:42b-48 will include two major parts. The first part will articulate the existential situation of women in Jesus' day, and in the Indian context the questions raised within it. We shall restrict our exposure of women's status to the menstrual taboos imposed by religion and related social customs that deprive women of full humanhood. The second part will introduce the narrative analysis of the passage and elucidate its meaning and message.

1. Womanhood Then and Now

1.1. Womanhood in the Jewish World

To understand the implications of the story of the “Touch of an untouchable” (8:42b-48) it would be helpful to situate it in the Jewish context of Jesus’ time. This should take us back to the understanding of the concept of blood and the status of women in the Judaic world.

1.2. Blood of Life

Like all ancient religions, blood was regarded as something sacred in the religion of Israel, for blood of life (Lev 17:11,14; Dt 12:23) and everything touching life are in close contact with God, the source of life (Leon-Dufour 1973: 52.). Life is conferred by God and is under his dominion. In sacrificial rituals, blood that represents life was symbolically offered to God (Lev 1:5) at the altar (Lev 4:7) or sprinkled before the sanctuary (Lev 4:6). In the covenant ritual, the blood of the victims was sprinkled on the altar and on the people signifying that the covenant partners shared a common life (Ex 24:6-8).

In the period of the New Testament, the sacramental significance of the blood of the Eucharist also follows the Hebrew understanding. The blood of the Eucharist is the blood of the new Covenant (cf. Ex 24:8). It is life which is communicated from Jesus to his disciples (Jn 6:53f; 1Cor 10:16).

1.3. Blood, a Stringent Taboo

The fear of blood dates back in all probability to the primeval times. Among the Jews it was one of the most stringent taboos. A clear instance of the all-embracing nature of its polluting power is found in Dt 22:8. The taboos on menstrual blood and abnormal issues probably come under this category. Menstruation was greatly feared. It was extremely dangerous for a man even to see the menstrual blood. In fact, “Ancient man reacted to the phenomenon of menstruation with a horror that seems to us grotesque and hysterical,” says B.J. Bamberger (Selvidge 1984: 621). Thus, it is a paradox that the life-creating power of women conferred by God and

manifested in the “flow of blood” is regarded as bad or impure and makes her unclean (Lev 15:19f) and an untouchable.

1.4. The Accursed Menstrual Blood

According to Leviticus, any woman who has a regular monthly period is termed ‘unclean’ and must be secluded or banished for at least seven days (Lev 15:19,28). If the cycle is irregular or there is a lengthy gynecological abnormality, the woman remains “infectious” until her ailment is cured (Lev 15:25). A woman was also cloistered following the birth of a child (Lev 12:1-8) as she was considered to be unclean after childbirth. She was ritually unclean for 7 days and was subject to purification for 33 days after the birth of a boy. The birth of a daughter caused 80 days of restrictions. She was unclean for 14 days and needed 66 days for purification (Lev 12:1-5). At the end of her menstrual period, purification could be gained only by a ritual bath. The ultimate humiliation was the sin offering which was required both after menstruation and child birth. The “priest shall make for her before the Lord the expiation required by her unclean discharge” (Lev 15:30). This unclean stigma compelled the women of Jesus’ day to believe that they were soiled and unworthy most of their adult life.

1.5. Cultically and Socially Ostracized

Purity regulations restricted the woman’s space and movement in the society, home and religious places. Normal social functions were prohibited during a woman’s ‘infectious’ period. Being cultically unclean, she was ostracized in cruel ways. She could not participate in any of the religious rituals. A Jewish woman was ordinarily prohibited from learning the Torah. A Rabbi writing even boldly states that it is “better to burn the Torah than to teach it to women.” Only a special section of the Jerusalem Temple, ‘the Court of women’, was open to women free from impurity. But during their menstrual days the Temple was closed to them. Women’s participation in religious ceremonies was peripheral. Her polluted state deprived her even of this minimum participation (Wahlberg 1984: 32).¹

1.6. She Is an Untouchable

The menstruating woman was also treated as an untouchable. Apart from the ritual uncleanness of the Jewish tradition, certain taboos had also developed. Initially it was believed that hygiene and excessive cleanliness were the origin of menstrual taboos.² Later taboos were attributed to her defilement. Pervasive and negative attitudes about menstruation and menstrual blood gradually developed. It was believed that her defilement was communicated to every object with which she came in contact. No law abiding Jew would venture to go near anyone suffering from the obvious cultic stigma of leprosy, menstruation ... in those days. No one would risk ritual integrity by daring to be touched physically by one who was unclean or tainted.

Strict taboos were established to guard against the dangerous influence of menstrual blood, especially to men. Psychologist Karen E. Paige points out that common taboos have prohibited menstruating women from cooking or preparing food for men and from participating in religious activities. A woman was not to touch anything consecrated nor go to the sanctuary until the time of her purification is over (Lev 12:4b). This concept of uncleanness was used to segregate adult women for most of their lives and forbid them access to male precincts of religious, political and educational power. These laws and taboos have been extended and made more onerous both by rabbinical traditions and interpretation and by customs that the Jewish women themselves adopted in later years (Singer 1905: 301.). Thus, the Jews believed that women's subordination had its origin in the Genesis creation account (cf. 1 Cor 11:8). However, women's menstrual blood that was believed to be impure or unclean appears to be the determining factor in de-positioning women in the social, political and religious fields. The religious laws placed women in the sub-altern category of non-Jewish slaves with a 'master' over her (father or husband). So woman was always inferior to man, except in motherhood where her status was equal to that of man.

Women in Jesus' days must be seen against the contemporary Rabbinical Judaism of his time. Jesus' Kingdom movement does not totally reject the Torah but offers an alternative interpretation of it by focusing on people as the locus of God's power and presence.

Through the power of his word and deed, Jesus tries to correct and change the oppressive practice of taboos. However, his vision for a just society has not totally penetrated into the Jewish-Christian environments.

2. Womanhood in the Indian Context

One of the reasons for the restrictions commonly imposed on girls in India was the deeply ingrained dread regarding menstrual blood. Here again religion has played a vital role in sanctioning such beliefs. Menstrual blood is dreaded in the Koran (II. 122.11.228) as well as in the Brahmanical law books of Hinduism.

2.1. Laws of Purity of Hinduism

According to Manu: “A Brahmana when engaged in dinner should be careful so that he does not see a ‘*candala*’ (a man of the despised class), a menstruous woman, a boar, a fowl, a dog ...” (*Manusmriti* III. 239.1V.40).

The Law book of Vyasa states that when a woman has her menstruation she should abandon all her works. She must remain in a secluded place with shame and as a destitute without exchange of any word with others. She must lie on the ground and eat only once at night in an earthen pot. Having spent three nights in this way, she will be pure on the fourth day when she has bathed and washed her clothes (*Vyasa Samhita* II. 37-40).

The *Atr-smṛiti* compares her to an untouchable ‘*candala*’ (despised caste). It also warns anyone accepting water from or talking with a menstruous woman (v. 49-66).

The Puranas too attach restrictions to the menstrual flow of blood. Mantras or the Vedas should not be recited before a menstruating woman. One should not talk with her, nor eat anything offered by her. If she touches anyone, she has to perform a number of penances (Bhattacharya 1980: 14-15).

Menstrual blood is not always dreaded in Indian tradition. It also has a significance of holiness. The sign of blood has the double effect of forbidding contact and of imparting vital energy. Though the menstrual blood is used only in the Tantric cultic worship of the

great goddess Parvati, the smearing of the colour of blood on cult objects is an essential feature of all forms of Hindu religious rituals and mode of worship. Thus, there appears to be an ambivalent meaning attached to this blood of life. On the one hand blood is regarded as something holy and efficacious, and on the other there is an ingrained dread of impurity and unholiness attributed to menstruating women (Altekar 1938: 230).

2.2. Menstrual Rites and Taboos

In several Indian communities the first menstruation is celebrated as a great event. Jabmali Mary Soosai of Tamil Nadu explains that the girl is adorned with jewelry and dressed in a bridal sari. The celebration is an announcement that the girl is ready for the matrimonial market. At the first menstruation, the concept of female pollution related to the menstrual cycle and childbirth are communicated to her. The Hindu society regards women during this period as extremely impure and temporarily an untouchable. There are several religious and social taboos to be observed.

Savitaben of rural Gujarat says that the menstruating woman is isolated from the family and made to live in an outhouse or shed with separate bedding and utensils. She cannot step into the kitchen to cook or serve her family members. She is not allowed to perform the 'puja' at home or in the temple. If this taboo is violated, a woman has to fast as atonement for her sin. Even the sight of her person and the sound of her voice are to be avoided. She is free from her uncleanness on the 5th day after a bath. Hygiene rules often appear in the form of religious taboos in Hindu culture. The cult and taboos de-recognize her existence and regard her as a non-person.

3. Women and the Church

The Church can boast little of its treatment of women. The Jewish perception of the place of women in religion and society as well as its conception of purity and pollution has in subtle ways affected the role of women in the Church. In the Church today we may not have overt blood taboos, but we have their equivalents. Women are barred, rejected and considered inappropriate for certain places and pursuits in the Church. In fact Leonard Swidler and oth-

ers have noted that “the taboo was the basis for the Catholic Church in not allowing a woman in the sanctuary during Mass, for she might be menstruating and hence is unclean” (Walberg 1984: 32). Today women may be given token recognition and representation in the Church, but women are still excluded from decision taking and given a peripheral place in the Church’s system of governance. This exclusion and subjugation are partially based on the traditional association of women’s status with sexuality, sin and reproduction, and cultural myths of labelling women as polluted, temptresses, weak and inferior.

The tendency to perceive women as unclean prevails even in our contemporary times. This is evident in the shocking response a black Anglican Deaconess received from a man who refused to accept the Eucharist from her “because women smell of blood” (Hebblethwaite 1991: 1129). Internalized beliefs in such myths are manifest when one observes men and women evading women distributing communion at the Eucharistic celebration and changing lanes to receive it from a male. In subtle and silent ways, the unclean stigma continues to taint a woman’s image and status.

Jesus’ Kingdom movement of liberating the voiceless and the powerless must be re-activated. A re-reading and re-interpretation of the Scriptures will enable us to restore a woman’s image and her rightful place in our patriarchal society and Church. An attempt is made here to study the episode of the woman with the flow of blood (Lk 8:42b-48).

4. Context of the Episode: The Galilean Tour

The episode of the woman with hemorrhage occurs in the Galilean tour section (4:14-9:50). It is fitted into a framework of spatial movement and is held together by its geographical orientation. Conzelmann notes that in addition to the temporal schema in the journey ministry of this section, there is a geographical schema, which has an underlying Christological significance (Conzelmann 1960: 193). Galilee becomes the exclusive setting for Jesus’ activity. From the wilderness (4:1-13) Jesus returns to Galilee (4:14). He goes to the synagogue at Nazareth (4:16) and then down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee where he heals all kinds of diseases (4:40). He preaches in

the synagogues of Judea (4:44) and by the lake of Gennesaret (5:1). He moves about the cities and villages “proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom of God (8:1).

Jesus’ Galilean ministry is presented as a journey narrative of an itinerant preacher (cf 4:14; 44; 7:11; 8:1). It is a continuing theme in the rest of the Lucan double work, often described as the “Gospel of the way.” After the inaugural manifesto which gives a blueprint of Jesus’ ministry and what he plans to accomplish, Jesus’ mission is presented as a ‘going forth’ (4:30; 8:48). The story of Jesus’ missionary journey in Galilee is unfolded (4:14-9:50) before he sets his face to Jerusalem (9:51), the city of destiny. This expansion of Jesus’ journey through Galilee to Jerusalem and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) has a christological and theological purpose.

K.L. Schmidt notes that, in the journey motif the evangelist gives the change of place significance for redemptive history (Conzelmann 1960: 29). and Conzelmann states that the ‘tour’ is not just a matter of a change of place. It serves the purpose of representing a stage of Christological development (Conzelmann 1960: 46). Though the journey narrative is a Lucan literary device, it is important to note that the ‘tour’ in the Galilee section (4:14-9:50) has a liberative significance. Luke presents Jesus as a sojourner on a Kingdom mission, liberating the ‘poor’ from the power of evil (4:18-19 cf. 4:43; 8:1).

4.1. Crowds Follow Jesus

At this juncture, it is important to note the concept of ‘following’ and the presence of the ‘crowd’ in the Lucan presentation of Jesus’ ministry. While Jesus is ‘on the move’ through the towns and villages of Galilee, on his way to Jerusalem, they follow him everywhere. They are present at the very outset of his public ministry (4:15; 3:7, 10) and figure frequently thereafter as surrounding and pressing upon him to see, touch and hear him (5:1,15; 6:17-19; 8:4, 40, 42; 9:11). The Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims is an offer of salvation and a challenge that summons them to decision. This offer of salvation that the Kingdom symbolizes, demands a response.

Crowds follow and throng round Jesus. Some, like the Scribes and Pharisees reject Jesus and his message (5:21; 6:6-11; 7:49). They disapprove of his company with “tax collectors and sinners” (5:30) and with the religious and social outcasts. There are also those who acclaim and praise him when they hear and see the power of his word and deed. Among these are those who are amazed but remain as passive spectators, in awe of Jesus’ wondrous deeds (4:15,22; 5:26; 7:11). Many more seek him and come to him to be healed (4:40, 42; 6:17-19). Some having witnessed the power of Jesus, choose to respond to him more concretely. Among these are the disciples who not only accept the master’s teaching but also identify themselves with the master’s way of life in an intimate and personal following of him (6:1,17; 7:11; 8:22-25; 9:18). Apart from the disciples who are called, chosen and sent out to witness and extend the Kingdom of God (6:13; 8:1-2; 9:1-6), other individuals who having experienced the saving power of Jesus and responded to him in faith, are brought into fellowship with Jesus and are commissioned to be proclaimers of the Kingdom of God (7:50; 8:48; 17: 19; 18:42).

A unique feature of Jesus’ ‘proclamation tour’ of the Kingdom is the inclusion of women among the disciples who accompany him. Luke’s mention of women followers and naming them (8:2-3) is a significant opening to a new understanding of discipleship in Jesus’ Kingdom mission. An analysis of some of the ‘women passages’ (7:36-50; 8:40-48, 13:10-17) reveals the significant role women have played in the spread of the Good News. Like the Twelve and the other disciples, Jesus sends them to witness the Kingdom. The women are empowered and commissioned with a function as “witnesses from Galilee (Conzelmann 1960: 47-48). Acts 1:22 clearly shows that we cannot restrict the circle of witnesses of the Kingdom to the ‘apostles’ alone (Lk 6:13).

4.2. Jesus, the Empowered One

The context of the episode reveals the gradual manifestation of the power of God in Jesus’ acts of teaching, preaching, healing and commissioning – all signs of the ushering of the Kingdom of God into human history. Restoring newness of life to Jairus’ daughter and wholeness of life to the woman with hemorrhage, is an ex-

pression of the presence of the Kingdom. Jesus does not allow the laws of ritual impurity to hinder his Kingdom mission. Jesus touches the dead girl and becomes 'unclean' (Num 19: 11-13). The cultically unclean woman touches Jesus and pollutes him (Lev 15: 19-31). However, the power of the Kingdom does not rest in holiness and cultic purity. Deliverance of the young girl of 12 years from the snares of death and of the woman with the flow of blood for 12 years from the bonds of oppressive taboos, is a sign of the power of God's reign and of the establishment of re-constituted Israel.

4.3. Magical Miraculous Practice?

There are some conventional features in the episode: length of the woman's illness, futility of medical help, unnoticed touch of the healer's garment, the going out of power. These are popular ideas bordering on the magical and superstitious practices of healing in the Jewish world.

That nobody could heal her seems to indicate that she had resorted to different methods of treatment. The remedies usually tried in such cases were sometimes severe and sometimes loathsome and absurd. The Talmud has a wide selection of the strangest popular remedies (Loos 1968: 511). Misconceptions about the woman's touch, instant cure and the going out of power further heightens the prevalence of popular beliefs in magic in Jesus' time (Mk 6:56). Besides, as Plummer suggests, the woman's faith appears to be tinged with superstition. She believed that Jesus' garment could heal magically, independent of his will (Plummer 1922: 235). Some like Klausner have even attributed the touch of Jesus' garment and the instant cure to 'auto-suggestion' (Loos 1968: 515).

However, what initially looks like a superstitious act is transformed into a personal encounter. The narration of the woman's healing does not stop at the touch of the garment. The subsequent verses expose the healing power of Jesus and its effect on the recipient. What radically distinguishes Jesus' miracles from those of Jewish and Hellenistic narratives, is their reference to God's power (5:17) and his kingly reign (7:18-22; 11:20).

The episode of the woman with the flow of blood has an underlying miracle structure. It has all the essential characteristics

of the healing pattern set by form critics. But, an analysis of the passage reveals that the saving power of Jesus extends beyond physical healing. It reveals its liberative nature when interpreted in the context of the Lucan Jewish world.

Some of the miracles of Jesus were not mere acts of healing but were acts of power that liberated men and women from the enslaving power of evil (13:10-17; 8: 26-39). Jesus comes as a liberator to free humanity from this evil power (4:16-18). His deeds and encounters are actualizations of the Kingdom of God that destroys the power of evil and recreates and restores people to full humanhood. This we see taking place in the healing of the woman with the flow of blood.

5. The Setting of the Episode (8:42b)

After healing the demoniac at Gerasenes, a Gentile town from where Jesus was asked to leave (8:37), Luke prepares the scene for the encounter between Jesus and the woman with the flow of blood with a twin time-reference phrase in vv 40 & 42b. The first presents Jesus as returning to Galilee where a waiting crowd welcomed him on his arrival (v 40). The second transitional phrase which is also the opening verse of the pericope, introduces us to two significant Lucan motifs: 'Go' (porenou) and 'crowd' (ocloi). The motifs provide the point of departure to understand the communicative target of the evangelist in the episode.

The use of 'go' at two strategic points (vv 42b & 48) of the pericope is significant. It emphasizes with theological pregnancy the place and function of the episode in the Kingdom mission of Jesus. Luke often uses the verb 'go' in relation to Jesus' tours in Galilee (4:30, 42b, 7:11) and to his journey to Jerusalem (9:51, 53, 10:38, 13:33), the city of destiny. The verb expresses the movement of his Kingdom mission. The onward thrust of his mission seems to move towards some task or goal clearly programmed in the manifesto (4: 16-19).

This movement in the Gospel seems to reveal a purposeful action of Jesus. He was constantly aware of God's mandate and of the purpose of his being 'sent' (cf 4:43). God's mandate directed all

his movements for he had to fulfill what he came for (cf 4:43) and “finish his course...” (13:33-34) with bringing the Kingdom of salvation to all. This is evident in Jesus’ encounter of the woman ‘as he went’ (42b) towards Jairus’ house to continue his Kingdom mission of restoring life to the dying daughter (8:41-42). The cure of the woman takes place in the context of Jesus’ progressive movement of proclaiming the power of the Kingdom.

The waiting crowd that welcomed Jesus (v. 40) now becomes an unruly mob when it sees him moving away from them. The crowd for the most part of Jesus’ ministry is an anonymous background. However, verse 42b does not refer to the anonymous crowd but the crowd that had heard Jesus’ word (8:4) and waited to welcome him on his return from Gerasenes (8:40). Physical contact with Jesus was inevitable but the contact was that of a mob, impersonal and unintentional. This dense crowd was an appropriate setting for the ailing woman to approach Jesus secretly. Her defiling presence and identity were unnoticed in the crowd.

6. Biology is Destiny

The woman is plagued with a flow of blood for twelve years. The profoundest aspect of the woman’s lingering infirmity is its hopelessness “no one was able to heal.” Commentators generally interpret the woman’s infirmity as a mere physical disease and its healing as any other miracle of faith (5:17-26; 7:2-10; 18:35-43). However, the woman’s predicament was not just her incurable illness but also her permanent state of defilement. A continuous issue of blood was an illness that meant more to the Jews than to the Gentiles because it made the woman cultically unclean before the Law (Lev 15:19-31).

6.1. The Touch of an Untouchable

“She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment”

Her prolonged illness was a social and religious stigma and rendered her totally powerless as she was also economically impoverished. Apart from a physical cure, she also had to be freed from the enslaving taboos that deprived her of her right to live as a normal

human person. Her female disease subdued her status to that of an outcast like the cultically unclean lepers' (5:12-14; 17:11-14). Her female Jewish origin made her a 'double outcast'. No wonder she risked financial ruin to become healthy and ritually clean again.

The nature of her prolonged illness that was attributed to sin and the resultant levitical defilement compelled the woman to be wary. She did not want to own the legal defilement of her malady publicly. She had internalized her unclean status and did not feel worthy to touch Jesus openly or request him for a healing in public. She was also afraid of a possible reprimand from Jesus or the crowd and so chose to do the least obvious act "to come up behind him and touch³ the hem of his garment."⁴

6.2. The Touch Transmits Power that Heals

"Power has gone forth from me"

Her gesture of faith was not unmixed with fear and possibly superstition. But her singular faith in Jesus' power urges her to press through the crowd and touch the hem of his garment. Her touch transmits Jesus' healing power to her. The noted French exegete, François Bovon, aptly describes it as "*Le flux de sang est stoppé par le flux de la puissance divine*" (Bovon 1991: 437). This means that the flow of blood is stopped by the flow of divine power. We have several instances when Jesus touched people. He touched the leper (5:13); the servant's ear (22:51); the bier of the widow's son (7:14). There are also instances of Jesus being touched: Crowds sought to touch him (6:19); the woman touched his garment (8:44). Pharisees accused Jesus of permitting a sinful woman to touch him (7:39). The touch in all these incidents symbolically becomes the transmitter of Jesus' power. He transmits his healing power to the sick (6:19; 8:44), his life-giving power to the dead (8:55-56) and his forgiving power to the sinful woman (7:50). Thus, we see that the power transmitted through the touch does not only bring physical healing but also saves and restores wholeness of life.

6.3. The Touch Exposes the Stigmatized Woman

“Who was it that touched me”

This episode points to something more significant than the immediate reference of physical healing. Jesus’ saving power also regenerates and re-creates. It brings those touched with God’s power within the realm of the Kingdom of total salvation.

Why was the touch of an ailing woman in the crowd so important? Why was Jesus more sensitive to the touch of an individual than the crowd that pressed round him? With his outright query, “Who was it that touched me?” we enter the decisive phase of the episode (vv 45-48). The story now takes a new turn of meaning. Jesus was not seeking mere information about the touch but more importantly he wanted to expose the identity of the unknown and stigmatized woman. In exposing the hidden identity of the woman, Jesus defied a priestly and Talmudic ban on being touched by an unclean person. He ran the risk of breaking the Law and of exposing his own pollution. His assertive statement “someone touched me” serves the double purpose of exposing the identity of the woman and of proclaiming his liberative power manifested through the act of touch.

The power (*dunamis*) that has gone forth from him has healed her physically and would restore wholeness of life (v 48) to her. The touch transmits the power of Jesus to the woman. Apart from the “power from above” (24:49) promised to the apostles after the resurrection, this is the only incident in the public life of Jesus where the power of Jesus heals the person and remains in her. It constitutes her relationship with God as the Father with the Son (Gal 4:6).

6.3. The Woman is Reinstated

“Daughter, your faith has made you whole”

The woman is empowered to declare in the presence of all her experience of Jesus’ saving power. Unmindful of the crowd and running the risk of being rebuked by them, she publicly narrates why she had touched him and how she was healed. The words “why” and “how” encapsulate her testimony. It was not only an

open testimony but also a proclamation and a witnessing of the power of the Kingdom. The power that was transmitted into her brought about a radical change in the woman. The woman who earlier was voiceless, now speaks; who was powerless, is now empowered to declare publicly; who was anonymous and hidden in the crowd, is now brought to prominence (v 47). The untouchable becomes whole.

She who was branded as an untouchable and treated as one (cf. Lev 15:19-31) shows how a 'touch' restores her. She thus exposes her new found identity. In describing how she had been healed, she exposes the power of Jesus and the nature of his Kingdom mission. The woman's active response in v 47 is a re-play of the first part of the episode (vv 42b-44) where the same details are shrouded in the woman's silent action.

In response to her proclamation of the divine power within her, Jesus brings the woman out of her anonymity and addresses her as 'daughter'. In calling her 'daughter' the liberating power of Jesus draws the woman from the margin to the centre, from invisibility to recognition and from a non-person to the status of a daughter. The power that "has gone forth" from Jesus remains in the woman and recreates her. Her restoration is a re-birth and an entry into the family of those "who do the will of God" (8:21). Jesus found favour with the woman because of her single-minded faith and calls her "daughter" (v 48).

Like the sinful woman (7:50), the bent woman (13:16) and Zaccheus, the despised tax collector (19:9), this outcast woman too is socially and cultically re-habilitated. This is the only incident in the New Testament where Jesus in the vocative case addressed one of the poor of the kingdom as 'daughter'. In 13:16 and 19:9 the bent woman and Zaccheus are addressed as 'daughter of Abraham' and 'son of Abraham'. The appropriateness of calling the woman 'daughter' in the presence of the crowd is to announce her new found identity and relationship with God. This daughtership is different from the blood relationship of Jairus' daughter and from the covenantal relationship of the daughter (13:16) and son (19:9) of Abraham.

“Who Is my Mother, my Brother, my Sister ..?”

The woman has appropriated for herself a dignity worthy of a child of God, of a true daughter in contrast to those who claim descendency by inheritance and observance of the laws (13:14) or who claim natural relationship with Jesus by blood ties (8:19-20). Jesus outrightly questions the crowd “who is my mother, my brother, my sister ...(son, daughter..)? This pointed question shows that the true kindred of Jesus are those who do the will of God (8:20). Ignoring his blood relatives, he calls those among the crowd his mother, sister, brother ... indicating that there is something more than mere biological relationship.

The woman’s self surrender and openness in responding to Jesus’ Kingdom message (8:1-3) enabled her to receive the promised salvation in the assuring words “daughter, your faith has made you whole” (v 48), just as Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, Anna and Simeon did. Jesus justifies his action of addressing an outcast woman as ‘daughter’. He proves to the crowd that her faith action has yielded the hundredfold assured to those who believe and hold fast to the Good News of the Kingdom (8:8, 15).

Jesus’ relationship with the woman is a radical breakthrough of the patriarchal cultic structure and social system. In calling her ‘daughter’ he shows that it is neither biological ties nor covenantal laws that gives a woman or man her /his rightful status. It is only a trusting response to the saving power of Jesus, the core of the Kingdom message, that makes one a true mother or father, son or daughter, brother or sister of Jesus, that is, a true disciple of Jesus. For faith is an essential aspect of discipleship. The woman manifested this faith of a true disciple in her attitude of self-surrender and in her personal commitment to Jesus.

Jesus extols the faith of the woman. His assuring words “Your faith has made you whole” corrects the popular misconceptions of magic and superstition associated with her healing for it was the grasp of the woman’s faith and not her hand that wrought the cure. This was the beginning of her faith-commitment to Jesus and his Kingdom mission.

Like the Samaritan leper (Lk 17:11-16), the forgiven woman (7:36-50) and the blind beggar (18:35-43), the polluted woman also returned to Jesus with an attitude of gratitude and self-surrender. She came trembling, prostrated before Jesus and proclaimed in the presence of all, her healing experience. In this act of metanoia, she not only received the gift but the giver, not only the healing but also the healer. Her attitude of self-surrender and faith-commitment to the person of Jesus is that of a disciple. This is already the beginning of a greater task of discipleship that Jesus will commission her with.

6.5. The Woman is Empowered for Mission

“Go unto peace”

Verse 48 brings the story to a climax. Jesus restores the woman’s status to full humanhood with his reassuring words, “daughter, your faith has made you whole.” Having empowered her, he now sends her with a commission “Go unto peace.”⁵ The woman who had begun her witnessing in the presence of the crowd (v 47), is now sent on a mission of proclaiming the Good News. The focus is shifted from the saving activity of Jesus to his commissioning activity “go⁶ unto peace” (48b cf. 7:50). In Jesus’ Kingdom, proclaimers of the Good News were not limited to the chosen Twelve (9:1-6) or their inner circle (9:49-50). Any recipient of God’s saving power and peace are called to proclaim the source of such a blessing.

The specific end of the woman’s appointment is clearly indicated in the commission ‘Go unto peace.’ She is sent with the divine power of daughtership to witness the salvation that has come to her. Her total well-being, completeness, wholeness and restoration summarized in the word ‘peace’⁷ which is identical with Acts 28:28 is the content of her witnessing. Along with the other ostracized men and women: the Samaritan leper, the forgiven woman, the bent woman and others, the polluted woman will help mend the breach created by oppressive religious rituals and taboos.

The defiled woman who was kept aside for twelve years is brought to prominence as ‘daughter.’ The powerless woman is empowered to be a witnessing disciple of the Kingdom. She is sent to

bring the hope of the Kingdom and the 'peace' of sonship and daughtership to all other powerless men and women. Empowering and entrusting her with a witnessing commission, God's Kingdom makes an advance. The episode puts in evidence the nature of the Kingdom and foreshadows the purposeful movement of Jesus' mission.

7. From Enforced Invisibility to Empowered Women

The episode of the woman with the flow of blood clearly shows that the Bible has both an oppressive and liberative thread running through it, specially in its narration of women characters. Samuel Rayan rightly observes, "the biblical background of Jesus' ministry is an interplay of lights and shadows as far as the feminist question is concerned" (Rayan 1986: 5).

Jesus' Kingdom movement was basically a 'protest' movement rejecting all forms of discriminatory laws and oppressive rituals. Jesus went against the traditional religious and social system of the times. It was a movement of metanoia. His value system brought about a reversal of human order. It offered hope and wholeness to the scum of society which also included women. It empowered powerless women with a 'power' that freed them from social and religious enslavement and restored to them their identity and dignity. Freeing of the cultically unclean woman, the bent woman, the sinful woman and others, are manifestations of the presence of the liberating power of God.

Is the liberating power of Jesus still operative today when millions of women continue to be dehumanized by oppressive socio-religious systems, laws and taboos? How can the Kingdom continue to be effective in the lives of these women? The answer is the woman herself for the power of God is within her. This is appropriately expressed in the Hindu perspective of femaleness. The female is first of all *shakti* (energy/power), the energizing principle of the universe. The female is also *prakriti* (Nature) – the undifferentiated Matter of the universe. *Shakti* underlies both creation and divinity. All creation and preservation of life in the Hindu world is based on femaleness (*shakti*), the primordial divine energy. *Sakti* is the dynamic power that makes everything alive.

Women would fail to be true to their ‘femaleness’ if they did not believe in their innate *shakti* (power/energy). Like the cultically unclean woman, women must take the initiative to be healed of their internalized wounded self-esteem. Self-emancipation begins from within through a process of metanoia – a metanoia from a wounded self-esteem to a sense of personal worth in relation to society, religion and the whole of life. With God’s power within us, women must strive to cast off enslaving shackles and press on for self liberation.

Jesus healed the nameless outcast woman, re-instated her socially and he called her ‘daughter.’ The hidden woman is now seen; the silenced speaks. How can this Good News be brought to our society where women are compelled to live as anonymous, invisible and voiceless entities? Eleanor Roosevelt, co-author of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights once stated that human rights begin “in small places, close to home,” adding that “unless these rights have a meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.” Empowered women must become agents of power and touch the lives of other powerless women, beginning “in small places, close to home” and enable them to attain a status and an identity worthy of a woman. The touch of the empowered one makes a difference in our world for:

One by one we are coming to awareness
One by one we are committed to a cause
One by one we are challenging the structures
One by one we are changing the laws.

Side by side we are bound to make a difference
Side by side that is how the spirit thrives
Side by side we are receiving some concessions
Side by side we are changing our lives.

Hand in hand we can manage any mountain
Hand in hand we are accomplishing the climbs
Hand in hand we confront discrimination
Hand in hand we are changing the times.

Notes

1. Wahlberg, R.C.1984 p. 32 notes that later Medieval Catholicism had made the stipulation that menstruating women were not to come into the Church.
2. A taboo might be a blessing or curse. Thus blood produced defilement but when properly treated the stigma of impurity is removed. Menstrual taboos are prominent in classical religious laws: Hebrew, Hindu, Zoroastrian, etc. The Mishna and Talmud include several chapters on "Menstruous Women" JBL (1984) 621.
3. It is believed that the practice of touch seems to have its origin in the Elijah-Elisha healings. It was used to identify the healer as prophet in whose body lies supernatural healing power (1Kg 17:21; 2Kg 4:34; 13:21 cf. 8:46). The ritual is mentioned in Qumran but not in Rabbinic healings
4. It is important to note that the usual practice in the NT healing episodes is; others beseech Jesus to heal an infirmed person (4:38. 5:18-19; 7:1-3 cf Mk 7:32; 8:22) or Jesus takes the initiative to cure them (Lk 6:6-11; 14:1-6). There are also instances of individual men stricken with a physical infirmity seeking a healing in public (Lk 18:37-38). Even social and cultic outcasts like the lepers make bold to approach Jesus directly and publicly request him for a cure (5:12; 17:13). However, there is no instance of infirmed woman openly approaching Jesus or directly requesting him for a healing. She either silently comes from behind (8:44) and through an unnoticed gesture seeks healing or she is picked out by Jesus from the crowd (13:10-17) or others beseech him for her cure (4:38). The woman's status and infirmity pose a serious setback for an open and direct encounter with Jesus.
5. "Go in peace" echoes 1 Sam 1:17 and Lk 2:14. This peace is more than a blessing or greeting. It is a gracious bestowal of power that the recipient retains if he/she is a faithful follower of the Kingdom (8:15,21).
6. "Go" (porenou) is frequently used in the Lucan writing to commission Jesus followers to continue his Kingdom mission: the forgiven woman (7:50); the lawyer (10:37); the Samaritan leper (17:19); the apostles (Acts 5:20); Philip (Acts 8:26) and Paul (Acts 20:1,22; 22:21). These have personally experienced the saving power of the Kingdom and are commissioned to be witnessing disciples of his Kingdom.
7. 'Peace' has its basis in the OT 'shalom' (1 Sam 16:5; 2 Sam 18:28; Judg 19:20). Shalom is a Hebrew word that has a sense of wholeness in relation to oneself, the human community and to God. It includes a keen consciousness and deep acceptance of Yahweh's activity of blessing bestowed with every saving act (Ps 29:11 assures the people in distress "the Lord will bless his people with Shalom" (cf. Num 6:24-26). TDNT vol II 402-411.

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Conclusions of the National Consultation on:

PARTNERSHIP IN THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

01. An invited group of 40 women and men religious and priests (theologians, social workers, activists, educators, counsellors, formators, etc.) from all over India gathered for a National Consultation on “Partnership in the Mission of the Church”, from December 7-10, 2003, at Ishvani Kendra, Pune. The Consultation was initiated by Streevani: an organization committed to the empowerment of women and to the promotion of gender-justice in the Church and the Indian society.
02. The Mission of the Church includes the ushering in of a just, egalitarian and participatory society. But the presence of unjust, oppressive structures and a patriarchal mindset have led to a Church and a society that are not just, egalitarian and participatory. Therefore, the Church in its endeavour to be a prophetic sign needs to address issues related to gender-justice in the Indian society.
03. Hence, to understand better “partnership in mission,” the participants journeyed for three days through paper presentations, panel and group discussions in a common search and dialogue.
04. Down through the ages, women more than men have experienced the pain of exclusion, of being denied power in decision making, of lack of professional training, of being subjugated to structures of patriarchy and stereotyped roles, of being denied full participation in the ministerial life of the Church, and of being seen as objects rather than subjects in the Church and in society.