



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Who Said She Could Follow?”

Part II of the Lenten Sermon Series, “Following”

Mark 5:25-34

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My oldest daughter, Paige, is married to Ansh Mathur, and is getting married to Ansh Mathur. She and Ansh will exchange vows in May—in India—over three days. The family agreed that we only could afford one big wedding so, last Sunday, a small, Christian wedding was held in our living room with in-person attendance of immediate family and a few others we put to work.

- Alice Loftin was there. She decorated the mantle. (Beautiful!)
- The Link family was there. Elizabeth filmed the ceremony, Chris was the groom’s valet, and Eleanor was a Flower Girl Intern.
- And Sarah and Jen were there, two of Paige’s friends. They were the photographers and bride’s attendants.

Sarah and Jen became friends the first day they met as freshmen at Presbyterian College. They invited a few other girls to join them for a daily debrief in Sarah’s dorm room each night. Paige was not one of those invited. But there she was in Sarah’s room the first night, and I imagined someone asked, “[What is Paige doing here?](#)” The next night, there she was again. And the next night, and the next night after that. You see, they didn’t know Paige belonged in that group. But Paige knew she belonged, they just needed to catch up. That group of freshmen gals, and a few guys later adopted into the group, have remained fast friends to this day.



In the passage I am about to read, I am going to speak of someone who decided she belonged, even though others might not have thought so at first. Listen for God's voice as I read Mark 5:25-34.

²⁵ Now there was a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years. ²⁶ She had endured much under many physicians and had spent all that she had, and she was no better but rather grew worse. ²⁷ She had heard about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, ²⁸ for she said, "If I but touch his cloak, I will be made well." ²⁹ Immediately her flow of blood stopped, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. ³⁰ Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my cloak?" ³¹ And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" ³² He looked all around to see who had done it. ³³ But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. ³⁴ He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

The ultimate question of this passage is, "Who belongs with Jesus?" Though it is a different question, I want to begin by asking, "Who belongs in a church?" That is not the same as asking who belongs with Jesus. They are related questions, but not the same question.

For instance, I did not belong in the church Millie and I first attended when we were in graduate school. There was nothing wrong with the church. It was a good church. Good minister. Great outreach in the community. And it was walking distance from our schools. But the minister's style of preaching and my style of listening did not jive. He might have had wonderful content in his sermons, but I couldn't tell you. He had this sing-song delivery that went up and down, gently rocking me to sleep. It got to the point that I couldn't even survive his reading a passage of scripture. Fortunately, I didn't snore then as I do now, so Millie didn't have to jab my ribs.

Sermons really matter to me, so we eventually switched to another wonderful church pastored by someone who worked here and helped get the Presbyterian Community Center started, Ben Sparks. That was a better fit.

When people look for a church to attend,
maybe to join,
maybe to become involved in
they look for a fit.

- Some look for a church where they can learn something, or feel something, or find a closer connection to God.
- Some look for a church to help them build a good moral foundation, especially for children.
- Some look for a church that will help them become a better person.
- Some look for a church that will bring them comfort in troubling times.

By the way, those are not reasons off the top of my head but rather the four reasons off the top of the list provided by the Pew Foundation in a report of a study in 2018. I have two other



reasons that would crack my top four (powerful worship and the church's outreach), but that's beside the point. The point is there are many worthy reasons for people to choose a church, and for the vast majority of folks they all have to do with belonging. I'm not talking membership here, but being a part of something, being part of a community. We have to respect that. There are folks who have visited here and joined elsewhere, and we can only be happy they found a good church home.

But what about those people who want a congregation to be a fit, but they think there is something about them that might exclude them if it were known? I am talking specifically about those things that we wouldn't necessarily see as a violation of the Gospel. Many of us think that churches were wrong to exclude people from fellowship because of their race, sexual orientation, social status, or political affiliation. But what about those people who just don't want to be fully seen. Sure, it might be because of what they would readily say were mistakes or wrongs.

a violation of trust in a marriage,
a criminal record,
things once said and done that did great harm to other people.

But it could also be something that is not wrong, but something they fear would make them seem unacceptable and not fit in.

Want some easy examples? I'll give a few, but don't judge people for any of them. I have sympathy for all of these.

- Some will stay away because they are sick, and they don't want to infect others. Who could fault them for that?
- I have known folks who have stayed away from worship simply because they don't want to be seen using a walker or a wheelchair. Of course, we want folks not to worry about that, but give them some space.
- How about those who don't want to be exposed for how little Bible and theology they know? Plenty of people feel that way but won't say it. They won't say it until a preacher calls them and asks them to serve on the session, and the first question they ask, "[Will there be an exam?](#)" (Which is to say, if you feel that way, believe me, you are not surrounded by nothing but Bible scholars and theologians)
- And though I said earlier that political affiliation should not be a reason for exclusion, it is becoming increasingly true that as churches become increasingly polarized there are more and more members afraid to admit to others how they vote. It's a thing, people saying you can't be Republican or Democrat and be a Christian. Not here, not with me, not with you (I hope!), but it's a thing.

Every faith community, like every other human community I can think of, has people within it that hide something about themselves because if it were known it might make it seem like they do not belong. And if you give just three or four thoughts to the subject and think about



confidentiality, social norms and what's going on in the world, you'll realize that while this can be unnecessary sometimes, this can also be wise and prudent at other times.

Having said that, I do love it when someone who is different decides that they belong, and the community just has to learn to deal with it. I think Millie will smile when I tell this story because it's a good memory we share. At the last church I served—a wonderful, accepting church—there was a young adult who had an intellectual disability. This is not a great illustration because this church was called to include people with intellectual challenges. Still people are people so here is my story. He would go up and speak to anyone and everyone. He would yell out “Hey Buddy,” no matter your name. He would talk a bit too loud and, if he heard that there was a concern in your family, would be quick to give you a hug. That church was called to make space for folks with intellectual challenges, but nevertheless he took some getting used to and sometimes visitors needed debriefing. In time, folks came to accept him for who he was and even looked forward to seeing him. They'd say, “Hey Buddy” back to him as loud as he greeted them.

Our passage from Mark is about someone like that, someone who hasn't done anything wrong, but still has something about her that would make many people think that, perhaps, she doesn't belong—at least not there. I understand the situation of the woman who has a chronic problem with hemorrhaging better having read what Francis Taylor Gench has to say about her. In a man's world, even menstruation is something few people want to talk about and something to be hidden. This crowd would mostly be made of men (just look at the crowds of the gospels. “*There were 5000 people who were fed, and also women and children.*”) But menstruation is not her problem. She has something chronically wrong. The issue here is not a shameful sin that needs to be forgiven but an unclean situation that needs purifying, an unwell situation that needs healing. If you don't see the difference, just remember when we asked good, innocent people to keep their distance and not to touch for two years.

But if this problem is not dealt with, this woman's life is over. We know she once had means because she once went to physicians to help her. But while they drained her resources, her situation only grew worse. She would easily receive compassion from most of those in the crowd that day. Maybe some would help with food and money. But maybe they would prefer to leave food at her door and not have to come in her house.

Gench helped me not to be too harsh toward the crowd. Like many preachers in the past, I could easily quote Leviticus 15 and point out how purity laws forbid anyone from sleeping in the bed she sleeps in or sit on the chair she sits in. But, historically, these extreme purity rules were really followed only by strict priests, pharisees, and the devout who are both rigorous and literal (until they have the problem, that is). If Emory is sick, we're keeping her home. But I'm going to hug her. Among family and friends, and within the community, there was plenty of bending of the rules then as now.

Still, in Jesus' day (and really in ours) her problem is not something most of those who have it would want others to know about. And if they find out and are uncomfortable enough, someone can make an issue of it by calling on the manual and quoting Leviticus 15. This woman can't live without going out and encountering others, but just having to hide her condition is itself isolating.



But this woman with the flow of blood joins in with the crowd following Jesus, and she jostles like everyone else trying to get close to him and touch his cloak because she believes Jesus has something to offer her that those physicians did not. Many in the crowd would not invite her if they knew, but there she is.

And that is what makes her remarkable in Jesus eyes. Just to emphasize how remarkable she is, understand that Jesus didn't invite her either. He didn't even know she was there. This is the only miracle involving Jesus in the Gospels that is not initiated by Jesus himself. The writer of the Gospel of Matthew can't accept this, and he changes the story. He says that after the woman touches the hem of his garment, Jesus turns, sees her, and then heals her. But in Mark, the woman is healed before Jesus even sees her. He feels the power that heals her go out from him and then he turns and asks, "**Who touched me?**"

Let's pause and admire the beauty of what is in front of us. This passage is the perfect setting for the jewel of a truth we all need to keep hearing. This woman is healed because she has faith that she belongs even with her condition. Her entire culture pushes her to keep her distance, but she doesn't even need Jesus to make a ruling as to whether she should come near. "**Who says she can follow Jesus?**" Not the crowd. Not even Jesus who doesn't know she is behind him. *She* follows Jesus because she gets it. She gets what makes it possible for any of us to follow Jesus, no matter how worthy we think we already are.

What she gets is *grace*. She knows that despite what anyone says, even in quoting those verses in Leviticus, that she has a place in Jesus' company. It is not because she is well or unwell, acceptable, or unacceptable, guilty or innocent, clean or unclean. It is because God's grace, which welcomes others, *welcomes her*. Jesus makes that clear to her when he says, "**Daughter, your faith has made you well.**" The woman's embrace of grace is the faith that has *saved her*—which, by the way is a better translation than "made you well."

I have to back up here. When Jesus turns and asks, "**Who touched me?**", the disciples are incredulous because in this crowd there are at least hundreds of answers to that question. But there is something about—*her*. Gench points out that he uses "an explicitly feminine participle."¹ In other words, Jesus is looking specifically for *the woman* who had touched him. In a crowd of mostly men, in a culture asking that space be maintained between genders, he wants to know where the woman is.

This is a vulnerable moment. You've seen the athlete giving high fives to the sea of hands as he runs out the tunnel but then stops to speak to just one, you wonder why. It can be good because it's a friend, or it can be bad because a fan offended him.

"**What woman touched me?**" could go either way, don't you think? The passage says the woman trembles. The woman who so shamelessly and courageously fought her way through a jostling crowd to touch (Jesus)² now trembles with fear that she might have overstepped, and she falls down before him. Right there in this vulnerable moment, we see her remarkable faith. It is in humility before God that we find strength among others.

¹ Gench, Francis Taylor, *Back to the Well*, Westminster John Know Press, 2004.

² Gench, p. 35



The passage says she tells him everything. The woman, who had good reason to not be forthcoming about her issues, tells Jesus everything because she trusts that nothing about her disqualifies her from belonging in his company.

Jesus' response is extraordinary. First, he draws her need out into the public letting everyone know she belongs and her faith is to be admired. Second, he doesn't take credit for this happening. He does not present himself as the male hero of this woman in peril. He gives her credit for following him and touching him. She is so bold in assuming she belongs in the crowd of followers, and Jesus wants the followers to know *she is right*.

Good for her.

Oh, and good for you and me. Even for those of us who others would say, “Of course she belongs. She grew up in this church.” Or, “Of course he belongs. He's an elder and he's always trying to help people.” The truth is that all of us have this secret. None of us have achieved the right to be in the presence of God. None of us have earned the right to follow Jesus. We belong for a reason that is no better and no worse than the reason the woman feels she belongs. God's grace.

I have been one fortunate pastor in that I have served three churches that understand that grace, not worthiness, is what makes us belong. Remember how I said at the beginning that belonging with Jesus and belonging in a church are related questions, but the answers are not the same. There are understandable reasons why some would feel more comfortable in this church over that church. On this side of death, that is how it always will be with human communities.

But when a church truly understands at its core that the only reason any of us belong with Jesus is because of grace, that's when a church finds it easier to widen its welcome. Because grace brought *us* in, we celebrate grace bringing others in. It becomes easier to celebrate the new, interesting, and different people who become a part of us because their stories become fresh stories about the most important story we have to tell: the story of God's grace.

How much easier it is for insiders to welcome others for who they are when insiders realize that the only reason we are inside is that grace brought us in.

