



Touch of Faith, Yongsung Kim

A Bleeding Woman Encounters Christ

SCRIPTURE

Luke 8:43–48

MAIN IDEA

Jesus calls us out of the shadows and claims us as his own.

OPENING PRAYER

O Lord and Master of my life, spare me from the spirit of apathy and meddling, of idle chatter and love of power. Instead, grant to me, your servant, the spirit of integrity and humility, of patience and love. Yes, O Lord and God, grant me the grace to be aware of my sins and not to judge others, for you are blessed, now and ever and forever, Amen.

Ephrem the Syrian, 306–373

INTRODUCTION

The story of the bleeding woman in Luke's Gospel is often read in conjunction with the story of Jairus's daughter, and, more widely, with the Gerasene demoniac from lesson two (Lk 8:26–39, 40–56). All three stories are about the healing of people who

live on the periphery of Jewish-Galilean society. The stories of the two women are presented as an intercalation, that is enclosing or “sandwiching” one story in the middle of a different story so that each affects the interpretation of the other. The bleeding woman is not named in Luke's account, nor is she identified as a Jew or Gentile, but Scripture has referred to her as “a woman diseased with an issue of blood” (Lk 8:43–44 KJV), and “a woman suffering from hemorrhages” (Lk 8:43–44 NRSV). The story takes place during a long and hectic day. According to Luke, Jesus calmed the storm on the sea (Lk 8:22–25) and healed the Gerasene demoniac (Lk 8:26–39) before encountering the bleeding woman. Upon returning to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, Jairus (a ruler of the synagogue) pleaded with Jesus to accompany him to his house to heal his terminally ill twelve-year-old daughter. On his way there, the bleeding woman discreetly touched the fringe of Jesus' clothes and is healed of her illness (Lk 8:44).

Historically, articles and commentaries have focused on purity issues surrounding the woman's illness because of the Levitical laws about menstrual blood. According to the laws, a woman is impure for seven days from the beginning of her menstrual flow (Lev. 12:2), anyone who touches a woman who is menstruating becomes unclean

Luke 8:43–48

⁴³ Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her.

⁴⁴ She came up behind [Jesus] and touched the fringe of his clothes, and im-

mediately her hemorrhage stopped. ⁴⁵ Then Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" When all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you." ⁴⁶ But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me." ⁴⁷ When the woman saw that she

could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. ⁴⁸ He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

until evening, and whoever touches her bed or anything she sits on during the week is unclean until evening and must wash their clothes and bathe with water (Lev. 15:19–23). In the time of Jesus these laws were still being followed but Luke does not render Jesus ceremonially unclean after he came into contact with the woman, nor does Luke discuss the woman's obligation to bring the prescribed offerings following the end of her discharge and after she was healed (Lev. 15:28–30). Instead, Luke focuses on the woman's physical health, her disability, and her economic condition.

EXAMINE THE CHARACTERS

Who is this woman? What do we know about her? Very little. She had an illness that made her bleed and she had been suffering from this illness for twelve years. Her ethnic identity is ambiguous since Luke does not establish whether she was a Jew or Gentile. In her book, *Jesus' Healings of Women: Conformity and Nonconformity to Dominant Cultural Values as Clues for Historical Reconstruction*, Joanna Dewey says that the woman is not called a daughter of Abraham or a member of the Jewish people, but simply "daughter." The sole title of daughter infers that the woman was a Gentile, but one with a kinship relationship to Jesus.⁶

While Luke does not locate the source of the woman's hemorrhage, the Greek language suggests that it was a vaginal or uterine flow. Fortunately, menstrual products were available to her, though not in the variety we know. According to Egyptian hieroglyphics, tampons were probably made from natural fibers such as rolled papyrus and wool. In their book, *Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation*,⁷ authors Elissa Stein and Susan Kim recount that Greek women wrapped lint around small pieces of wood to create a tampon, Roman women wore pads and tampons made of soft wool, and Jewish women probably used similar natural fibers.⁸

The National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion states that chronic diseases are defined broadly as conditions that last one year or more and require ongoing medical attention or limit activities of daily living or both. During the time of her bleeding, life must have been very difficult for this woman. New Testament professor Sarah Harris notes that the woman's energy levels would have been critically low, and her general health and ability to cope with the physical demands of life would have been diminished. She would likely have sensed her life

⁶ Joanna Dewey, "Jesus' Healings of Women: Conformity and Nonconformity to Dominant Cultural Values as Clues for Historical Reconstruction," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 24, no. 3, (1994): 122–31.

⁷ Elissa Stein and Susan Kim, *Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2009).

⁸ "The History of Menstrual Hygiene," SimpleHealth, August 15, 2022; simplehealth.com/blog/a-history-of-menstrual-hygiene.

was ebbing away, and blood, which was a positive force in Judaism, would have been a negative thing for her.⁹ The woman's life in Galilee would have at least been aided by access to a good clean supply of water for bathing and general cleanliness.

Chronic illness can also affect a person's mental health. The woman was reduced to a state of desperation evidenced by spending her life savings on doctor's appointments and treatments. It is also possible that her poor condition was exacerbated by the treatment of it. In the first century, attitudes towards health were influenced by religious myths in which gods were viewed as responsible for both the wellness and illness of humans. People seeking healing were often treated by doctors who were limited by their ancient medical knowledge and by magicians who performed incantations and rituals.

Contemplate

How has chronic illness affected you or people in your community? What kind of impact has such illness had on your faith?

Why do you think some people suffer physically more than others? What do you think about the idea that there might be a spiritual reason for suffering?

Select several Scripture passages that encourage you and write two or three prayers that you can use to encourage someone who is chronically ill.

SACRED ENCOUNTER

In Luke, the story of Jairus and his daughter and the story of the bleeding woman are sandwiched together. Jesus heads out with Jairus to his house, is interrupted by someone else who seeks healing, and continues on to see the dying daughter. While these stories intersect, Luke describes glaring differences between the characters. Jairus went to Jesus in a public place, fell at his feet, and pleaded directly with Jesus to heal his daughter. In contrast, the bleeding woman's plan for healing was a covert operation. She hid in the shadows and waited and watched and hoped. She could not approach Jesus in the same way as Jairus because in first-century Galilee, it was culturally unacceptable for a woman to approach a man in a public place. The difference in social class added another tier to this story. Jairus was a leader in the synagogue, which meant he belonged to a higher class and had access to Jesus. The bleeding woman had no such access. Despite her restrictions and the risks involved, she made her way to Jesus through the crowd, touched the fringe on Jesus' garment, and was healed.

The woman's unique encounter makes this story distinct from others in the New Testament. She did not plead with Jesus for healing, nor did she fall at his feet. Instead, her encounter was discreet. She was an active agent in her healing. In the Gospels, other people have reached out to touch the hem of Christ's garment in the hope that their needs would be met. The Gospel of Matthew records such an event: "After the people of that place recognized him, they sent word throughout the region and brought all who were sick to him, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed" (Mt 14:35–36). Even though the woman in Luke's story was discreet and touched just the fringe of his outer garment, Jesus felt power leave his body at the moment she was healed. Something incredible happened in that crowd of

⁹ Sarah Harris, "The Bleeding Woman: A Journey From the Fringes," *Feminist Theology* 29, no. 2 (2021) 113–29.

Contemplate

What taboos still surround menstruation in today's American culture?

Do you think we should talk openly about topics like menstruation and menopause? Why or why not?

If spirituality and faith take into account all of who we are, why not engage in discussing all issues of the body, mind, and spirit?

people. Despite pushing and pulling on all sides, it was clear to Jesus that a miracle had taken place. Jesus called the woman out of the shadows and claimed her as his own. Through this interaction between Jesus and the woman, we see God and humanity acting in harmony.

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

The bleeding woman in this story displays agency. "Agency refers to the thoughts and actions taken by people that express their individual power."¹⁰ Luke's account makes clear that the woman's faith was exemplary. But when her faith and agency met, she was able to defy the rigorous gender boundaries placed on her by her culture and reach for healing. Both her faith and her agency were deployed and kept her resolute. The use of the term "daughter" is illustrative of Jesus' inclusion of the woman. Jesus looked at this bleeding woman who appealed to him for help and called her daughter, a term of intimacy and love that signified a tender and protected place in the family.

Women have used their agency to effect change in their lives and in the lives of others many times in

history and in the present day. The transformative power of agency was witnessed when women fought for the vote during the women's suffrage movement, when women in Nigeria fought against the terrorist organization Boko Haram, when Iranian women protested modesty laws that took away their liberty, and when women worked to end period poverty.

The women's suffrage movement was a decades-long fight to win the right to vote for women in the United States. It took activists and reformers almost one hundred years to win that right, and on August 18, 1920, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution was finally ratified. Disenfranchised women were, for the first time, given the same rights and responsibilities of citizenship as their male counterparts. Many more years of struggle remained until Black Americans, Native Americans, and other minority women were granted the right to vote.

In Maiduguri, Nigeria, Komi Kaje is one of the women fighting Boko Haram, a savage terrorist organization. Since 2009, Boko Haram has killed more than 27,000 people and forced another two million out of their homes. In 2019, Boko Haram killed Kaje's brother and her boyfriend. Kaje and other women joined the Civilian Joint Taskforce, a civilian militia formed from members of communities affected by Boko Haram. It partners with and supports the military in its operations. The Civilian Joint Taskforce began as an all-male force, but women have joined in response to this violence.¹¹

In September 2022, in apparent enforcement of Iranian modesty laws, the country's morality police arrested Mahsa Amini, a twenty-two-year-old Kurdish woman. Amini died while in custody and

¹⁰ Nicki Lisa Cole, Ph.D., "How Sociologists Define Human Agency," ThoughtCo., January 21, 2019; [thoughtco.com/agency-definition-3026036](https://www.thoughtco.com/agency-definition-3026036).

¹¹ Idayat Hassan, "The role of women in Countering Violence Extremism: The Nigerian experience with Boko Haram," *Peace Insight*, March 20, 2017; peaceinsight.org/en/articles/role-women-countering-violence-extremism-nigerian-experience-boko-haram/?location=nigeria&theme=conflict-prevention-early-warning.

the police claimed she had collapsed suddenly from a heart attack during mandatory training on hijab rules. People reacted with fury when a video and a photo of Amini with bruises on her face and blood dripping from her ear was shared online while she was in the hospital in a coma. Protests exploded into the largest mass demonstrations Iran has seen in years. The Islamic headscarf and loose-fitting, modest clothing for women that are required by Iranian law have been at the center of conflicts over national identity, religious authority, and political power for decades.¹²

For many years Laila Brown, a sixteen-year-old from Vicksburg, Mississippi, and her peers had conversations about the stigma of menstrual periods and the lack of period products at school. After learning about “period poverty,” or inadequate access to menstrual hygiene products and education, Brown and her older sister, Asia, age twenty-one, decided to help. In January 2021, they co-founded 601 for Period Equity, a menstrual equity organization they named after the Vicksburg area code. 601 for Period Equity focuses on education, advocacy, and the distribution of free

pads, tampons, and other menstrual products to women who need them.¹³

Contemplate

With these examples and others in mind, how does your faith propel you to show agency and to act for and on behalf of yourself and others?

CLOSING PRAYER

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all I have and call my own. You have given all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace, that is enough for me. Amen.

Ignatius of Loyola, 1491–1556

¹² [nytimes.com/2022/10/05/world/middleeast/iran-protests-women-hijab.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/05/world/middleeast/iran-protests-women-hijab.html)

¹³ “601 for Period Equity,” January 2021; 601forperiodequity.com.

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A Bleeding Woman Encounters Christ

Overview: Through the testimony of the bleeding woman, the sacred encounter in this lesson engages the relationship between poverty, disability, menstruation, and chronic diseases. In Luke's story, the presence and power of Jesus prevails over the sense of impurity and shame imposed by society. Jesus recognizes that the woman's faith is the foundation of her self-advocacy and, by believing that Jesus will heal her, she overcomes her illness.

Materials: Intercessory prayer notebooks; easel pad and marker; feminine hygiene products and period pain medication with prices for each marked; pictures of sick people in need; images of the women mentioned on pages 32 through 33: leaders of the women's suffrage movement, Komi Kaje from Nigeria, Mahsa Amini in Iran, Asia and Laila Brown from Vicksburg, Mississippi. Consider adding more examples of women who used their personal power to help themselves and others, like the Mirabal sisters of the Dominican Republic.

Prayer

Take a few minutes to greet everyone by saying, "Today we will touch Jesus." Welcome each other face-to-face and shake hands (after sanitizing), hug, or bow respectfully in greeting.

Online option: Turn on everyone's cameras and, as each person enters, mention them by name with the greeting, "[Their name], today we will touch Jesus."

Lead the group in the opening prayer from the lesson.

Perform Luke 8:43-48

Invite participants to read the text divided into parts for the narrator (Luke), Peter, the woman, and Jesus. They may wear costumes and do a dramatic presentation or read together as a group. Consider having the woman wear a red sash or shawl as a sign of the shame of menstrual blood and the weight of impurity it carries in the story. When she touches Jesus she can take off the sash or shawl.

Online option: Search and share a short video of a performance based on the text.

Introduce the Lesson

Use the Introduction on page 29 to present this lesson to the group. This story takes place on a busy day when Jesus calms the sea, heals a man possessed by demons, responds to a father whose child is terminally ill, and helps a woman along the way. Could the message be that Jesus can heal anything and anyone: the inanimate sea, a person who has no control over the demons in his head, a child who is already dying, and a woman who doesn't ask for healing but takes what she needs?

Contemplate

Consider the questions on page 31 and prepare a list of people with chronic health conditions from your congregation, community, or public figures who have requested prayer or donations to help manage their expenses.

Discuss the *Contemplate* questions on page 31 with the group. Write the names mentioned on an easel pad or where everyone can see them.

Ask the participants to add their lists of names to their notebooks of intercessory prayers.

Examine the Characters

The woman in this story has been suffering from a physical ailment for a long time. She hears about Jesus and believes that he will be able to help her. Her belief leads her to seek the healing she needs.

Prepare a display of different feminine hygiene products and pain relievers, and their prices.

Online option: Search and share images of feminine hygiene products, pain relievers, and their prices.

Ask a few people to add up the cost of products they routinely used or use for menstruation and discuss the barriers to accessing hygiene products that some women must overcome.

Sacred Encounter

The self-advocacy of the bleeding woman in Luke 8 and current period advocacy efforts remind us of the importance of promoting empowerment in individuals and groups who experience marginalization. Organizations that develop partnerships with community-based groups involved with self-advocacy

efforts, like Self-Development of People (SDOP) in the PC(USA), support healing, liberation, and human dignity. Name additional groups that help others in these ways.

Contemplate

Women's health issues are not always topics discussed in Bible study meetings. The questions on page 32 lead us to talk about menstruation and menopause. The bleeding woman chose healing over shame. How can her encounter with Jesus, and the love and care he provided her, help us do the same?

Transformative Experience

Share the images you gathered of the women mentioned in the lesson.

Include Hispanic women in this collection by adding a picture of the Mirabal sisters, political activists murdered by the dictatorship of Leonidas Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. The United Nations established the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women in 1999 to honor the legacy of Patria, Minerva, and María Teresa Mirabal.

Add to your collection additional images (or the names) of women from your community or your congregation.

Closing Prayer

Write a prayer of strength with the group. Start with this phrase: Give us strength to reach out to Jesus for healing when we _____. Fill in the blank and repeat.

Send the prayer to the people on your intercessory prayer lists.

Before the closing prayer, and with any necessary authorization, collect an offering designated to support people who are poor and have chronic illnesses.

Consider observing March 1, Endometriosis Awareness Day.

Until the Next Lesson

Invite the group to pray over their intercessory prayer list until the next meeting.

Include in those prayers groups like SDOP that lead projects of empowerment.

Invite everyone to pray for their own health and for the health of those who suffer from chronic diseases.