



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Wholeness is Our Deepest Need

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 27, 2021

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15, 2:23-24; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

Let us pray.

*God of inclusive love,
who knows us each by name:
we thank you for the woman,
who stood out of the crowd
and defied her uncleanness
to connect with you;
we praise you for the leader of the synagogue,
who faced the mockery of others
to give his daughter hope;
may the flowing power of Christ
bring healing and acceptance
to the rejected and abused.
Through Jesus Christ, giver of life.¹
Amen.*

A few years ago, Dr. Jess Ting of Mt. Sinai School of Medicine was following the typical trajectory for a young plastic surgeon when he was asked about his willingness to work with transgender people. At the time, Dr. Ting said later, he had never met an openly trans person and didn't have any knowledge about what it meant to be trans. He had certainly never performed gender affirming surgery. But Dr. Ting was the only surgeon at Mt. Sinai who expressed any interest in leading its new Center for Transgender Medicine and Surgery. "Essentially," Dr. Ting recalled, "they asked everyone, and everyone else said no, except for me." By the time Dr. Ting was approached, it was the mid 2010s. LGBT was already a well-established acronym and rainbow flags were flying off the shelves of big box stores every June. Dr. Ting's colleagues, however, did not greet his decision warmly. His chairman, in Dr. Ting's words, "was pissed." "What are you doing?" Dr. Ting's superior asked him, accusingly. "Are you trans?" The chairman could not imagine why any successful plastic surgeon would choose to alter their career in order to help the trans community.

The 2019 film *Born to Be* chronicles Dr. Ting's at times Herculean efforts to care for a population that is horrifically neglected and misunderstood. Over the course of the film, Dr. Ting fashions vaginas and penises for his patients; he augments breasts and alters faces. He also learns again and again how important this kind of medical care is for the people he serves. Suicide attempts and other mental health

¹ Steven Shakespeare, *Prayers for an Inclusive Church*, 64.

problems are alarmingly common within the trans community, and medical transitions, while not cure-alls, can help some trans individuals feel better about themselves and about their places within society. Near the beginning of the film, Dr. Ting is prepping a woman named Mahogany for a facial feminization surgery in which Mahogany's prominent, masculine forehead bone will be re-aligned to look more like a cisgender woman's. "Mahogany... has this internal image of herself," Dr. Ting explains, "that is very mismatched to her external appearance and causes her a lot of pain and difficulty. We're just going to make her external face and her internal identity match. We're going to make her whole."

In this morning's Gospel reading, a different woman seeks to be made whole. This woman is in her twelfth year of suffering from an unspecified bleeding disorder when she enters the stage of Mark's Gospel. Because she is experiencing ongoing bleeding, the customs of her context dictate that she be considered ritually impure and therefore prohibit her from touching others or being touched. Her affliction, then, is social and psychological as well as physical. Like the trans patients who approach Dr. Ting for surgery, she, too, is scorned by society-at-large; she, too, is told to stay on the margins; she, too, experiences pain and difficulty; she, too, is viewed as deviant and strange. And like many of the trans patients Dr. Ting sees, who have suffered at the hands of confused family members and friends or unqualified and unlicensed physicians, she, too, has endured much at the hands of those who tried to help but did not have the understanding or the skills to effect real healing.

Like those same trans patients, the woman of today's Gospel reading takes the process of healing into her own hands. She knows what she needs in order to be healed, and she takes the initiative to make that healing happen, finding Jesus and reaching out to him to receive his sacred touch. In return, Jesus affirms her autonomy, endorsing her choice to come into physical contact with him despite the restrictions that exist to prevent her from doing so. The woman herself has the opportunity to make the decision about whether and how she is healed, and Jesus supports her in her decision. Social custom and the feelings of the larger community do not matter; the woman's desire to be healed and Jesus' willingness to let her be healed are the only factors that are relevant.

In the second story from this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus' lack of concern for social custom and for the opinions of others becomes even more evident. Onlookers to the healing of Jairus' daughter are skeptical, to say the least. They badger Jairus for his decision to involve Jesus and laugh at Jesus when he suggests that healing is possible. But Jesus disregards their bullying, literally evicting the naysayers from Jairus' house, and instructs Jairus to do the same. To fulfill a loving father's urgent request that his cherished daughter be healed, Jesus defies both the opposition of the community and an established tradition that considers dead bodies to be unclean. He attends to the expressed desire of the person who indicates a need, not to standard conventions of purity, and certainly not to popular opinion about what is appropriate or possible.

It's significant, I think, that, in both of these stories, Jesus heals through touch. So much of the pain that LGBTQ+ people have experienced throughout the years involves the overregulation of LGBTQ+ bodies—prohibitions both explicit and implicit that dictate if and how different human bodies are permitted to touch and be touched. This morning's Gospel reading throws shade at any community's attempt to zealously police the bodies of its members. It proclaims resoundingly that bystanders have little authority to pass judgment on who gets to touch whom; only the person or people requesting touch and the one doing the touching have the right to determine whether touching should occur and in what ways. I'm not saying that the community has no role in the regulation of touching; of course there are certain circumstances in which the community can and must intervene, particularly if consent is violated or power is abused. What I am saying is that, in most cases, those of us gawking on the sidelines while human beings consensually touch one another are not capable of accurately perceiving the extent to which that touch is healing and good. In general, individuals should be trusted to touch and be touched as they and their partners see fit.

I began to discover my own sexuality as a teenager in the aftermath of Gene Robinson's 2003 election as Bishop of New Hampshire. Leaders of the Episcopal Church at my school and parish had been outspoken in their support for gay and lesbian people. When I realized that I was a gay man, I knew that my faith community would not reject me because of my identity, and for that I give great thanks. But once I knew that I was gay, I was given little opportunity to explore what being gay meant. I desperately wanted to become a priest and, based on the ways in which the leaders of my communities were speaking about sexuality, I thought I was only permitted to express myself in highly limited, rigidly defined ways. In all honesty, the messages I heard from my church were not all that different from the messages taught to young people who sign purity pledges in conservative evangelical contexts. The only difference in my mind was that conservative evangelicals wanted me to wait for marriage to the perfect woman while the Episcopal Church in its infinite graciousness allowed me to wait for a lifelong commitment to the perfect man. I love the Episcopal Church, but I continue to hold a grudge against a denomination that patted itself on the back for being understanding and inclusive and yet tried to fit the full expanse of my sexuality—a holy blessing from God—into a very small box.

For the month of June, our Theology and Television discussion group has been watching a stunning Danish series about a clergy family called *Herrens veje*. I have not for one minute doubted the series' theological weight; our group has held extraordinarily rich conversations about theology week after week. But the show is Danish, and it does not skimp on nudity or sex. As the month progressed, I began to worry that I or—worse—Dean would soon receive an angry email about the adult content in the show—a show, I'll remind you, that I assigned as part of an official church activity. At our discussion a week and a half ago, one of the group members articulated an appreciation for the ways in which the more sensuous aspects of the series helped her to reflect on the importance of the human body and the mystery of the Incarnation—God becoming flesh. In response, I admitted my worry that people would be upset about this same carnality she appreciated and would write me to express their displeasure. The urbane parishioners of St. Bartholomew's, Park Avenue, quickly reassured me: that was not the case. They didn't mind the sex in the series. "This is New York!" one said. "It keeps us coming back," another added.

But in that brief moment I noticed how tempting it was for me—even me, the foolish young priest who dares to critique the progressive Church for its constricting ideas about sexuality—to become a propriety policeman, to decide who and what is suitable, to shut inconvenient bodies and stories out. How different am I, really, from Dr. Ting's chairman at Mt. Sinai, who just didn't think the concerns of trans people were worthy of a talented surgeon's attention? How different am I, really, from the crowd who cruelly ridiculed a grieving father for wasting Jesus' time?

This Pride Sunday, Jesus, our Incarnate Savior, invites us to imagine a world in which impossible healing takes place across forbidden borders, in which transgressive touch yields a blessing, not a curse. Let's not, then, reduce our observance of Pride into a safe, domesticated celebration of rainbow flags and easy platitudes. Let's turn our attention, instead, to the sacred and essential work of subversion—of rejecting rules, of challenging customs, of questioning standards, and of breaking down boundaries—so that, one day soon, all people might finally feel whole.

Amen.

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