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Ministry of Presence  
Martin Grove United Church  
November 3, 2019  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Mark 10:17-27

It will probably come as no surprise that my favourite stories about Jesus involve healing. I didn't check, but I think I've used this particular gospel story 2 times this year already, and in my mind at least I made a different point each time. Let's see if we can do 3 out of 3. There are lots of healing stories in the Bible of course. I read through Mark this week, looking at just the healing stories. Depending on exactly how you count them, I found 16 separate stories about Jesus helping people find healing. And in all but one of those stories, people approach Jesus for healing, or they approach Jesus and ask Jesus to heal a friend or a family member. Jesus does not go from village to village looking for people to heal. Jesus just visits villages and lets people come to him on their own terms.

Take our gospel reading today. It's the story we usually call the "Rich Young Ruler". Usually when we read this story, we consider it to be an indictment against rich people, or at least against wealth. But consider this. If Jesus was opposed to either rich people or wealth itself, why doesn't Jesus attack the problem more directly. The villages that Jesus visited were small, and there would have been one rich family in every village. Everyone would know who the richest person in the village was. And if you didn't know, you could easily tell because they would have the biggest house. If Jesus was opposed to wealth, he could easily have found the richest household in every village he visited and directly confronted the home owner. But we do not have stories like that in the gospels. We have stories like the one we read, where Jesus waits for people to approach him. Jesus is very passive in his approach to ministry. At least, Jesus is very passive in deciding who to minister with. Once Jesus engages, he goes for full-on tough love. Telling the man to "Sell all that you own and give your money to the poor", was a very direct and challenging statement - nothing passive about that.

Jesus waits for people to come to him. He does not seek people out. I think there is a good reason for that. It's because when we are talking about emotional healing, you

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can't help a person find their healing until they are themselves ready to engage. Also, the first step in finding emotion healing is to realize that you want to find healing and then you make an effort of some sort. Nobody can do that for you - not even Jesus. Jesus waits for people to come to him - that was the essence of his ministry of healing. Today, in modern "church development" language that is now called a "ministry of presence".

I'd like to share a story with you. It's a modern parable called, "The Parable of the Naked Woman". To make its point, the story uses sexist caricatures from the 1960's. Please don't be too distracted by the caricatures. They are simplistic in order to make a point. Please don't take any offence. One version of the parable goes like this:

A naked woman sat at a crossroad, where the road that went North and South, met the road that went East and West. People passed her, some who were ashamed, some who were angry, but most looked at her with disapproval. Some threw clothes at her, all colours and sizes, which landed in a heap. The woman knew that she was naked but would not lift a finger to cover herself.

There was a woman in an elegant gown, who stopped her journey and went to the naked woman, saying, "Here take my dress, see how beautiful it is." She took off the garment and handed it to the naked woman who instantly felt its weight. "This is very heavy", said the naked woman. The elegant woman nodded and said, "The wearer of that gown must always look beautiful, must always act charming, must always be still and maintain beauty. She must always display her wealth, no matter its incumbrance. "I do not want this dress," said the naked woman. "Here, take it back." But instead, the elaborate woman threw her dress on the heap, and sat down beside the naked woman.

There was a woman in a simple dress, who stopped her journey and went to the naked woman, saying, "Here, take my dress. See how easy it is? It takes no special care and is easy to walk in." She handed the dress to the naked woman who felt the weight of it. "What causes this dress to be so heavy?" "Thankless toil - years of washing, scrubbing vacuuming, diapering, remembering, catering, organizing, cooking, arguing, punishing. The wearer of this dress is forever the backbone of the home. She can never be tired, get sick, be alone, or cultivate her own interests." "Here, take back your dress", said the naked woman. But the simple woman put her dress by the side of the road and joined the

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elegant woman. And they began to argue between themselves about whose garment had been the heaviest.

Then a woman in a long blue habit stopped her journey and went to the naked woman. She said, “My child, you are naked, let me clothe you with this habit which is warm and safe.” The naked woman said, “Its weight is very great.” The holy woman said, “Yes. It knows the secrets of one hundred thousand souls. The wearer must show strength in silence and in solitude. She must understand birth but never bear children, she must understand the cravings of the flesh but never experience them. She must understand the ways of the world but never be a part of it. The woman who wears this dress must sacrifice herself constantly for the needs of others.” “I am neither fearful nor cold,” said the naked woman. “Take back your habit.” But the holy woman placed her habit with the other dresses, and entered into the argument with the others.

There was a professional woman in a red suit, who stopped her journey and she said “Here, this would be very smart on you. Its lines are professionally tailored and it gives a serious appearance.” She handed the suit jacket to the naked woman who asked, “Why does this garment carry so much weight?” “Do not be fooled by its professional appearance. The wearer of this suit lives in a sterile world and cannot be a part of any of the worlds you have seen so far. One can never be beautiful or artistic, for that would distract people from the business at hand. She must never have any relationship that would slow her progress to the top of her field. She must never be soft for then she would be the mark of those who would destroy her and take away her power. She must never be holy for the way of the spirit weakens the power of the world of the rational. So the wearer of this dress must remain closed like a prison so she can avoid all outside forces that would drain her of her power.” “This is frightening,” said the naked woman, and gave back the clothes. But the professional woman threw the suit on the ground with the others. Then she too joined in the argument, insisting that of all the garments, hers was the heaviest.

The women argued beside the naked woman, they argued far in to the night. At some point their arguments changed from self pity to blame upon the others. As each experienced the pointed finger of the others, she began to realize that there were things

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about her own dress that were worthy and good. And there were things that they were not ashamed of or encumbered by. “I know how to organize a large business, and make it run and how to handle many things,” said the professional woman. “Teach me that”, said the elaborate woman, “and I will help you make yourself beautiful so that you will enjoy the appearance of yourself.” “Teach me my attraction,” said the simple woman, “and I will teach you to bear and to love a child.” “Teach me about that” said the holy woman, “and I will teach you the wonder of the quest to know God.”

New life spread up amongst the women as they fashioned for themselves garments out of the clothing they had piled, each unique and each sharing parts from the other. As they talked and as they worked together, the naked woman got up and walked to the next intersection, west of them, and sat down.

I trust that each of us will draw our own teachings from that story. But I want to share with you the meaning of it to me. To me, the parable is about ministry and vulnerability and presence. The naked woman was vulnerable, partly because she was naked, but mainly because she engaged with whoever chose to stop and talk with her. As we said earlier, Jesus's own ministry was somewhat passive. Jesus waited for people to approach him, as does the naked woman. Jesus listens to people where they are at without judging them, as does the naked woman. And Jesus helps people feel comfortable with their own vulnerability, name their own issues, and find their own healing, as does the naked woman.

I try to be like both Jesus and the naked woman. I came to Martin Grove 4 years ago and sat down. I sat in vulnerability, and I waited and listened. To be honest, some people were like the people who walked past the naked women in anger and disapproval, people who preferred a more entertaining type of ministry and didn't immediately warm to my ministry which is a ministry of vulnerability and healing. But I am delighted that so many of you have found ways of engaging and have discovered your own ability to sit with me, and with others, as we have shared our lives together. And we have named our own life struggles and we have found healing. We are building new community by sharing the gifts that we all have. By sharing the gifts that we all are. I can't wait to continue that ministry with our circles of forgiveness that start this week.

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And I relate to the naked woman in one other way too. Because I find that I must now stand up, and walk to an intersection west of here, and sit down again. With very mixed emotions I need to tell you that I have accepted a call to Sydenham-Heritage United Church in Brantford, and I will begin my ministry with them on February 1, 2020.

I will miss you. As we have walked together over 4 years, I feel we have all learned from each other. And I care deeply for you. I will never forget what you have helped me learn about ministry, and about myself. You are wonderful people.

When I first heard the parable of the naked woman, that was the end of the story. But in my imagination, the story continues like this ... And after the naked woman moves on to a different intersection, the other women notice that the naked woman has left, and they miss her, and they grieve, but the people who are left continue to be a community of relationships and love. The people who are left continue to invite others into their midst and they listen deeply to whoever chooses to sit with them. The people who are left continue to live and to thrive, and to be a blessing to others.

I know that you will continue to be a place of hope and healing after I am gone. Be grateful for the gift that each of us is to each other. I am very grateful for all of you. Thanks be to God.

*Amen.*