

---

## *Could Someone Please Lend a Hand?*

[Click here for the podcast](#)

The Reverend Elizabeth C Knowlton  
Cathedral of St. Philip 8:45  
June 28, 2009  
Mark 5:21-43

It was a normal day at college, and I headed to the mailbox in the basement of my dormitory as usual. I pulled out a yellow square envelope addressed to me. I looked at the return address and saw it was from the world renowned psychiatric hospital, the Menninger Clinic. The first three numbers of the zip code for Topeka, Kansas were 666 and they had been underlined.

I opened the envelope and found a disturbing letter. It was from a good friend from high school. The letter was interwoven with passages that were cogent, and those that were garbled. The handwriting was erratic, and my overwhelming emotions after reading it were sadness and a little bit of fear. My friend was clearly not well and hadn't been for a long time.

During our high school years she had been part of my inner circle. A picture of her with my two other best girlfriends adorns my high school graduation pictures. We look happy and ready to conquer the world. My friend's eyes are lit up with life and we all look like we've just heard a great joke. No doubt authored by her.

She still is one of the wittiest people I've ever known. It was a wit laced with intelligence and courage. In particular, I remember her rising to the challenge of class presentations. While most of us would stand awkwardly at the front, mumbling from prepared notes, we could always count on something different from her. When we did a joint presentation on Mark Twain, she dressed in full costume—white suit, wild hair and cigar in hand, interrupting my prepared speech to bring words from the author in person.

Her presentation in Social Studies on book censorship was also fairly legendary. She had a stack of books that had been banned on the lectern and proceeded to make us aware of threats we had probably never known about. After she described each title she would toss it to the floor. The most concerning and the piece de resistance was a collection of Curious George stories. I can still hear her reminding us to beware of anyone we might see in a large yellow hat.

She was kind and she was loving. One of those people you could always call for an ear.

I don't really remember when I started to become aware of her difficulties. I do know that at one point in our friendship she had an episode that left her resident in the psychiatric ward of the local hospital. I went to visit her. While she was clearly not herself; the wit was intact. She pointed out to me the art therapist's project she had been invited to participate in that day. It was a line of dogs made out of golf balls. Hers was green and she said something to the effect of, "I might be crazy, but I really wish they didn't assume I was stupid."

As I spoke to my other friends at the time, it became clear that most people would not go to see her at the hospital. In fact

my boyfriend's father told me I should not go back. I remember being perplexed by the advice and surprised by the lack of attention she received. As time wore on, she became more and more isolated. She was removed from many daily activities and approached with fear and skepticism by those who before had rushed to her side. It was if whatever demons she was struggling with were feared to be contagious. And so, she was held at arm's length.

It was no different than the woman suffering from hemorrhages for 12 years in the gospel of Mark or the little girl who is dead. To be associated with my friend was to take the risk of being rendered ritually unclean. I've always wondered how much progress we've really made. In some ways, it would be easier if the purity codes were still being enforced. We would be clear on who was in and who was out. Were we to become contaminated by blood or touching a corpse, we'd have specific guidelines about how long we'd be separated from our communities. How long we'd need to shout out our status as people approached, so they could be warned.

We don't really know about the 12 years that preceded the woman with hemorrhages' encounter with Jesus. We know it was long enough for Jairus' daughter to be born and live through her childhood. By the time we meet her, she has lost even her name. We can imagine that she did not start out completely alienated. She might have been married. Her condition would have warranted any husband divorcing her without question. Her unclean presence would have been a threat to all who knew her. I can't imagine she was invited to the local football games. She probably did not routinely receive visitors.

She might have had all the potential in the world before the onset of her condition. She had some means to access the medical care of her time. She had resources that now were in financial ruin. We can only imagine the spiral of those 12 years.

When we meet people at this point, we rarely get the benefit of knowing their history. And to some degree, we probably prefer it that way. We don't want to remember that the ill-smelling homeless person we encounter might not have always been that way. We don't want to know that the person with dementia used to be a beauty queen. We are afraid and so we put those that make us uncomfortable in a safe, compartmentalized box. They are untouchable. We assure ourselves that their ritual impurity, while contagious, is at least containable.

Sometimes it works. Sometimes those people become so cut off we never have to deal with them or our own fear.

But other times we find ourselves in the place of Jairus.

From the outside, we look successful and powerful. We are leaders of the synagogue, or our churches, or our companies. But then something happens. Our precious child is ill. A dear friend is unexpectedly killed. Our economy shifts and we find ourselves unemployed. Our health insurance is cancelled. We--who have had everything going for us--- meet a situation that brings us to our knees as fast as 12 years of suffering. We are on our knees in a crowd begging for Jesus.

And we are told "Do not fear, only believe."

I have to believe that the woman with the hemorrhages was an unlikely witness for Jairus. That having seen her faith, he found a place of strength that allowed him to take a chance on Jesus. To ignore the crowd long enough to allow the possibility of healing. In the woman, he witnessed something in her that did not conform to his preconceived notions of her. In that moment, she was more than the woman he had seen skulking around the town all those years.

He saw the flash of what had been a joyful little girl playing with friends in the village. And that little girl was willing to take the risk to come into a crowd that had nothing, but revulsion for her and reach for Jesus' cloak. She said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Somewhere deep inside there was the wisdom to know that she would find a different response from Jesus.

Jesus was willing to take the risk of getting his hands dirty for the sake of healing and relationship. He was willing to name faith in someone who would have only been considered faithless.

I don't know what became of my friend from high school. I often wish I did know. We lost touch and I didn't make the effort to stay with her. I do however have a hope. My deep hope is that someone was able to reach across the lines of

isolation and hold her hand. I deeply hope she was made well by those flashes of her wit, intelligence and compassion that graced my life.

I also give thanks that she reminds me that we all can become the woman with the hemorrhages, even if we look like Jairus on the outside. We will all find ourselves on our knees at some point in this life. We will all have to stretch to find the faith that can make us well. If we are lucky we will find the hands of Jesus.

Let us not forget that those hands, Jesus' hands, are often disguised as ours. We are called as Christians to risk the impurity of confronting our own fears to be in relationship. We need to be willing to get our hands dirty. We need to emerge from a mocking crowd and know those on the margins. We need to look to those seem like they've never had a problem in the world. We are to help one another rise from our knees. We may be surprised as we help someone up, what it does for our own faith.

Amen

Comments? Contact Beth Knowlton at: [BKnowlton@stphilipscathedral.org](mailto:BKnowlton@stphilipscathedral.org)