

Jon Hauerwas – July 1, 2018 – “Twelve”  
Psalm 130 and Mark 5:21-43

There are all kinds of things that can make air travel uncomfortable. Delays. Long lines. Cramped seating. Lost luggage. Crying babies. Intoxicated passengers. Jet lag. Any of these can surface when we choose to journey long distances. Even so, I still feel the need to apologize to anyone who is preparing to fly and now has one more reason to squirm as I tell this next story.

On May 29 of this year, a 58-year-old Russian man was traveling from Spain’s Canary Islands to the Netherlands on Transavia Airlines. According to passenger reports, it smelled as if he hadn’t bathed in weeks. The man’s odor was so overwhelming that other passengers began gagging and vomiting. The flight crew sprayed air freshener and then attempted to quarantine the man in the plane’s bathroom. But, neither attempt was successful. The pilot ultimately decided to make an emergency landing in Portugal, at which time the foul-smelling passenger was removed.<sup>1</sup>

When I first heard this story, I immediately wondered if the passenger in question had some sort of medical condition. And, if so, what was it? The answer to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/smelly-airline-passenger-who-caused-emergency-landing-dies-of-tissue-necrosis-reports-say/>. Accessed July 1, 2018.

these questions came this week when CBS News reported that the expelled passenger was taken to the hospital in Portugal where his condition worsened. “He was diagnosed with tissue necrosis, meaning his flesh, fat and muscle cells were dying off from the infection. He was put into a medically-induced coma and underwent multiple surgeries.” But, when antibiotics and surgery failed to stop the progression, the man’s organs began to fail and he died on June 25.<sup>2</sup>

I tell you this story as a reminder that, even today, with all of the medical and scientific knowledge that we possess, there remain individuals that we cannot cure. Moreover, and for the sake of our own safety, comfort, and well-being, we remain willing to quarantine and expel other people from the general population. This fact does not make us monsters. It’s a simple matter of self-preservation.

I say all of this to put our second lesson in context. It is easy for us to read these ancient stories and wonder how people could be so cruel, by isolating and alienating others whose conditions they did not understand. But, for similar reasons, we take a variety of precautions that are not so different. If someone seems unclean, and we don’t know how to fix it, then we keep our distance and hope not to suffer the same fate.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* Accessed July 1, 2018.

In our Gospel lesson, we are introduced to two females. The first is a girl, twelve years of age, who has died. The second is a woman who has been hemorrhaging (read here, menstruating) for 12 years. She's sought every medical treatment at her disposal. She's spent all of the money that she ever had. And, tragically, she is only getting worse.

The woman's condition makes her a medical risk to others. In addition, she is deemed ritually unclean. She's not permitted to attend religious services. Others are afraid to touch her or get near her. In essence, she's been isolated from the world for 12 long years.

Friends, I invite you to consider that for a moment. To imagine what it would be like to go without human touch for 12 years. As if the medical condition was not bad enough on its own, you would also be denied friendship and love and community support. After all, incurable medical issues were viewed as a sign of God's judgment. Don't you think that the daily isolation must have been intolerable? And yet, this woman is bold enough to never lose hope. Somehow, she learns about Jesus and then seeks him out in an effort to be made whole.

Recently, I traveled with my family to Edisto Island, South Carolina. It's a journey that we've been making on an annual basis for the last several years. Edisto is a quiet place known for the many shells which wash up on its beaches. Each year, my brother, an avid fisherman, brings his gear and catches sharks from the shoreline. He's quite popular with the children when he pulls one ashore. They all want to see it and touch it. One night, he kept our oldest son out late to look for sea turtles. And while they didn't find any of those, they did stumble across more than one hundred large horseshoe crabs. June is their mating season.

Well, one morning, I was strolling along the beach, carefully sifting through shells. After about 30 minutes of this, I wandered past a group of retirees relaxing under a pop-up tent. "I've already found about a dozen diamond rings this morning," I said wryly. "Yeah, right," one woman retorted. "Not too many treasures around here."

Little did she know that the day before, I had discovered a shark's tooth, blackened in color by the sediment of the ocean's floor, and fossilized by a process that unfolds over the course of over 10,000 years. Later that day, I would find another one. Sometimes, treasures are there if we are willing to open ourselves to the possibility.

The woman in our second lesson did, by following Jesus and touching his garment. And a 12 year olds father did, as well. The number 12 here is no coincidence. Think of the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 disciples. There are twelve months in the year; 24 hours in a day, divisible by 12; 60 seconds in a minute, also divisible by 12. In scripture, the number 12 is an indication that something divine is at work.

Jesus said, “who touched my cloak?” But, he didn’t say that for his own benefit. Scripture tells us that he knew the thoughts of his opponents. So he said this not for his own benefit, but for the benefit of the crowd and for the benefit of people like us, who read and reflect on these accounts thousands of years later. Likewise, he told the gathered crowd around Jairus’ daughter that she was sleeping rather than dead to demonstrate God’s power at work.

What would have happened if that woman would have given up on hope? If she believed that no one could help her? And what if Jairus had given up on hope? You know, he wasn’t supposed to be a follower of Jesus’. He was a prominent person, a leader of the synagogue, and the kind of person that others would seek out for guidance and support. What if he had given up on hope?

Friends, the message here for us is one of perseverance. That no matter what obstacle we encounter, we need not stop hoping, and that we need not stop believing. Not in Jesus, not in scripture, not in the crucifixion, not in the power of God's work in this world. Treasure still awaits us. May it be so, and all thanks be to God. Amen.