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With great economy of expression, the mosaic in San Apollinare Nuovo depicts the desperate woman who stole a healing from Jesus.

Desperate

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Perhaps no one in the Gospels is more aggressive, less passive, in seeking Jesus' aid than the woman who suffered with a hemorrhage for twelve years (Mark 5:24b-34; Luke 8:43-48). Literally sneaking into another story (of Jairus begging Jesus to help his dying daughter), the woman tries to steal a healing from Jesus by touching the fringe of his clothing as he is walking in a large crowd. The woman is desperate: her physical disability renders her socially ostracized, and she has "spent all she had on physicians" (Luke 8:43) who cannot help her.

Jesus becomes aware that someone has touched him when he notices "that power had gone from me" (Luke 8:46). Unable to deny what she has done, the trembling woman falls at Jesus' feet, admits why she has touched him, and declares to the crowd that she had been healed immediately. The sixth-century mosaic from San Apollinare Nuovo depicts the moment when Jesus blesses the woman, saying "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace" (8:48). The physical healing has restored her to the community.

The mosaic is part of the earliest known cycle of scenes from the life of Christ: thirteen small mosaics (on the left lateral wall of the church nave) depict Jesus' miracles and parables, and thirteen (on the right wall) depict the Passion and Resurrection. The scenes are presented in chronological order. Since the mosaics are located at a great height—above the clerestory windows—the actions had to be clear, the gestures exaggerated, and the number of figures reduced to a minimum.

The Byzantine figures are flattened; they lack the three-dimensionality of earlier Roman wall paintings. The person to Christ's right may be Jairus, the synagogue leader who appears in the framing narrative. The other three figures (male and female) represent the community to which the woman can now return. The woman's prostrate position is emphasized, with her body covering half the foreground. The gold background is common in Byzantine mosaics, which were created from cut pieces, or tesserae, of glass or stone.

The mosaic cycle has been preserved in excellent condition in San Apollinare Nuovo, the leading church in Ravenna, which was the seat of the Byzantine Empire in Italy before it fell to the Lombards in 751 and to Charlemagne in 777. The city was later donated to the Roman See.[†]

NOTE

[†] P. J. Nordhagen, "Ravenna," in *Grove Art Online* (*Oxford Art Online*, accessed September 6, 2012), www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T070902.