

This image is  
available in the print  
version of *Health*.

**As the woman cowers at Jesus' feet, fearing what he will do to her for desperately taking his healing presence without asking, Jesus calls attention to her so that he may complete her healing and reintegrate her into the community.**

# Interrupted

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

**T**o the woman with an issue of blood, Jesus says, “Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your disease” (Mark 5:34). Surely it was a relief for this woman who tried to “steal” power from Jesus’ presence by touching his clothes. Her desperation is not foreign to our civilization either. Would we not welcome such a miraculous word of blessing when we or our loved ones are ill in body or mind? Instead, we must take relief in a medical doctor reporting that a surgery is successful, a diagnostic test result is negative, or a persistent symptom is being reduced.

*Jesus Healing the Woman with an Issue of Blood* is in a narrative series of mosaics along with the healings of the two blind men of Jericho (Matthew 20:29-34), the possessed boy (Matthew 17:14-21; Luke 9:37-43), and the paralytic at the pool called Bethesda (John 5:1-8). The characteristic style of the Byzantine period is evident in its gold leaf background, flat composition, and strong silhouettes enclosing the tesserae (cut pieces of colored glass) that form the figures. The mosaics adorn the wall of the spectacular palace chapel built by the Ostrogoth king Theodoric the Great in Ravenna, Italy, during the early sixth century and reconsecrated in 561 when the city became the seat of Byzantine government in Italy during Justinian’s reign (527-565).

According to the biblical story, as Jesus returns by boat to the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, a large crowd surrounds him on the shore. A man called Jairus, despite his stature as a respected leader of the synagogue, throws himself down at Jesus’ feet and begs for the salvation of his young daughter who is dying. Jesus does not reply but begins to follow him (Mark 5:21-23). Jairus is pictured on the left side of the composition, next to Jesus.

This first story is interrupted suddenly by another: in the crowd that accompanies Jesus and Jairus is the “woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years” (5:25). “While the nature of the woman’s loss of blood is not detailed, although the audience might readily infer that she has experienced some chronic uterine bleeding that has left her ritually unclean and a social outcast (Leviticus 15:25-33), the narrator does digress to describe her other losses in some detail,” explains Mikeal Parsons.<sup>1</sup> She has wasted much time in seeking a cure, suffered under physicians, and

squandered her wealth. Despite her efforts, her illness has continued to worsen. The only loss that remained for the woman was public shame.<sup>2</sup>

The woman was very aware of the healing power of Jesus “for she said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well’ (5:28). After she touches the back of Jesus’ cloak, “Immediately the hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease”; simultaneously Jesus is “aware that power had gone forth from him” (5:29-30). The healing power of the holy presence is sufficient for a miracle.<sup>3</sup>

The next part of the narrative is the scene depicted in the Byzantine mosaic. Jesus turns and asks who touched him; the woman cowers at his feet, fearing what he will do to her for desperately taking his healing presence without asking. Jesus calls attention to her, Parsons suggests, so that he may complete her healing and reintegrate her into the community.<sup>4</sup>

*Jesus Healing the Woman with an Issue of Blood* reminds us that illness often isolates people from their culture, and that true healing must involve their reacceptance into our common life. In this way, health issues are communal as well as personal, public as well as private. Though we need to experience the presence of Jesus in health as well as in sickness, we should be especially sensitive to those who are suffering and in need of *his* presence and *our* prayer.

## NOTES

1 Michael E. Williams and Dennis E. Smith, eds., *Stories About Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels*, *The Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible*, volume 9 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 89. The commentary is written by Mikeal C. Parsons and the stories are retold by Jo-Ann Elizabeth Jennings and Pam McGrath.

2 *Ibid.*, 89. Parsons points out that a person with a flow of blood also would be shunned by the community; the Mishnaic tractate on menstruation is even entitled *Nidda*, “banished.”

3 This theme also appears in Masaccio’s *Peter Healing with His Shadow*, which depicts an event typical of the miraculous healings recorded in Acts 5:12-16. In Masaccio’s fresco, Peter does not look at the lame men, just as Jesus does not interact directly with the woman in this story; yet, they are healed. See pp. 44-46 in this issue.

4 *Stories About Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels*, 90.



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