

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey St. Matthias Episcopal Church, Minocqua, Wisconsin

It was the early 1970's, and singer Helen Reddy had a problem. She had recently left her home in Australia to follow her dream of becoming a singer in the United States and was living in California. Her manager had convinced her to record the song "I don't Know How to Love Him" from the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Even though she didn't like the song, it got her the invitation to record an album. This was the big opportunity she had moved halfway around the world for.

The problem was the songs Helen was asked to consider for her debut album. She wanted to sing songs to honor the women in her life, her mother, her grandmothers. The women who's stories she grew up listening to that described how they endured an economic depression, a world war, illnesses, and loss and still managed to be the compassionate, kind, and generous people who raised her and encouraged her to follow her dream. Instead of finding songs that reflected strength and endurance, the songs she found were mostly about a woman's relationship to a man or her appearance.

Helen realized if she wanted a song that celebrated what she believed are the best qualities of being a woman, she was going to have to write that song herself. This intimidated her because while she had sung thousands of songs, she had never written one. In multiple interviews Helen Reddy gave throughout her life and career, when talking about this experience, she consistently referred to the process as prayerful, and believed God gave her the words of the song.

Helen Reddy, who died in September of 2020, is not the first songwriter or composer to credit the songs or music they wrote as coming from God. Years later, when she received the Grammy Award for this song, in her acceptance speech she thanked God who makes all things possible for making that song possible.

The words that became the Grammy Award winning song that continues to be iconic today – I heard it on the radio a few days ago – are: *Yes, I am wise, but its wisdom born of pain, yes, I've paid the price, but look how much I've gained, if I have to, I can face anything.* Those of you familiar with the song might be hearing in your head the music Ray Burton wrote to accompany those words that together became the song *I Am Woman*.

Whether you love or hate it, this song became part of women's movements and inspired so many women going through difficult circumstances. It recognizes both the struggles and strengths of women all over the world and could even apply to women who lived long before the 1970's.

Such as the woman alone in the crowd in today's Gospel who Mark described as having suffered from hemorrhages for 12 years. Most of what has been written about this woman focuses on her ailment, with scholars and commentators trying to diagnose her disease. But the author of the Gospel was not as medically specific as they or we would probably like. All we know is she suffered a chronic condition that medical professionals of her day were unable to successfully treat.

However, there is so much more to the woman than her illness. There is, like in Helen Reddy's song, resilience, endurance, courage, and strength. While some see a desperate woman, I recognize a woman who repeatedly went to the medical professionals only to be told they could not help her. Unfortunately, this was common throughout history. In the first century, while there were many reliable scientific medical methods of diagnosis and treatment, when it came to treating women, the science wasn't as reliable. As researcher Elinor Cleghorn has written in her book *Unwell Women*, in the first century being a woman was considered a malady and disease in and of itself, simply because a woman is different from a man, as Hippocrates of Kos, the Greek physician credited as the father of medicine wrote. He and other physicians who based their medical practice on his foundational work, focused on women's reproductive role, and not as whole human beings. To them, women were considered different,

unknowable and a woman's suffering or pain was punishment for being born a woman. This harmful idea is most likely due to the belief that women had brought evil into the world either through characters in mythology like Pandora who opened the box she was told not to, or in our Judeo-Christian religion Eve who took a bite of the forbidden fruit and then shared that fruit with the first man. If any of this sounds familiar, that is evidence of how those myths are still – unfortunately – pervasive.

The woman in today's Gospel is evidence that such myths are *not* of God and are simply wrong. Jesus did not come to magically take away diseases or illnesses. If he had, then we would not need doctors because disease would be a thing of the past. Jesus' interaction with the woman in today's Gospel is not about magically fixing what the doctors of her time could not. Instead, the woman and her story, and that of the little girl Jesus resuscitated in today's Gospel illustrate what we heard in the first reading this morning, that God does not give disease or suffering or death. God is life, not death. The life of God Jesus brought isn't just the ability to breathe, eat, and reproduce. The life of God Jesus brought is resurrection life and the restoration of wholeness and relationship with God. This life is not for the privileged few who look alike, think alike, vote alike, drive the same kind of vehicles, go to the same kind of church, have similar ancestry, or have the same income. This life is for everyone, most especially the people who are alone in the crowd, the people considered unknowable or untreatable, the people everyone else has given up on, the people exploited or used, the people who are underestimated, the people it can be too easy to ignore or look away from.

The woman in today's Gospel did not appear to have family who would speak for her, like the little girl fortunate enough to have a father with an important job. The woman had no more resources, her HSA card was spent, her savings account depleted from all her medical bills, and insurance refused to cover her. Perhaps some of you can relate to one or more of these realities. Some might suppose this woman was desperate, and willing try anything, but even if that was the case, it shows she had not given up. Some criticize this woman while others take the opposite approach and call her courageous for acting on her own and taking what she wanted instead of asking Jesus to heal her. We don't really know which interpretation is right. I suspect because she had been through several doctors and perhaps whatever they called the magical snake oil solutions of her day, the woman recognized something different in Jesus. Perhaps she recognized he embodied the life God gives, that Jesus' very being radiated that life and might be why she believed all she had to do was touch his clothing to find what she had been seeking for twelve years. Maybe, like Helen Reddy she realized if anything about her condition was going to change, she was going to have to make that change herself. And, perhaps also like Helen Reddy, she believed God gave her what she needed to make that change.

I love the part of today's Gospel where the instant the woman touched Jesus' clothing both she and Jesus simultaneously felt it. She felt the disease leave her body and Jesus felt power leave his. Jesus' response of stopping, turning around, and asking who touched him could indicate that even though the woman acted on her own, she and Jesus are somehow connected, and that connection is more important than anything else that happened. By stopping, turning around, and asking who touched him Jesus reveals that the woman, especially the person she matters, not because it was an opportunity to showcase his awesomeness, but because he is the embodiment of God's life and love and they are connected. That is why the woman matters. Sometimes when preachers start talking about who matters, some folks can feel tense and mistakenly think the intention is that one person or group of people matters more than others. Be assured scarcity thinking like that has no place in God's Kingdom. God's love and therefore Jesus' power is not limited or finite. There is more than enough for everyone because it is the stuff of resurrection, and the more we share, the more we give, the more there is to go around. There was plenty of life for both the woman and the little girl, who Jesus did not give up on when others advised him to do so.

Jesus did not consider women of any age a waste of his time or resources. Today's Gospel shows us how Jesus made room for women, and he obviously does not think of women as mysterious or

unknowable or their worth is in their appearance, ability, or relationship to a man. Jesus loves women because God loves women, and God does not punish women for being what we are. This does not mean Jesus loves men less. Whenever we hear someone say a person or group of people matter, no one else matters less. God's love and resurrection life are not a competition for resources. Instead, it is an invitation to prayerfully consider what we might have missed about a person or group of people. How they might have been mistreated, given less than adequate health care, pay, living conditions, or respect simply because of things like age, gender, race, sexual orientation, economic status, employment, religion, or politics. It is also an invitation to consider what we might believe about ourselves, and to remember our value is rooted first and foremost in being God's beloved. You are God's beloved. And when we act out of that belovedness, when what we say and what we do comes from that love, miracles can still happen. Some folks might be offended, think us too forward, or feel uncomfortable. But we can't worry too much about that. Because like reaching out to touch Jesus' clothing or writing the song or story we need instead of settling for what there is, when we act out of our belovedness, people might grow closer to God, the lonely might feel less alone, the person suffering might feel empowered to seek the treatment or help needed, harmful myths finally become a thing of the past, and we all could discover there is so much more love and life than we could ever imagine.