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**Title:** Questions Jesus Asked: Who Touched My Clothes

**Preaching:** Ryan Hazen, Lead Pastor, Mud Creek Campus

**Text:** [Mark 5:24-34](#)

**E-mail:** [Ryan Hazen](#)

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The Gospels record Jesus asking three hundred and seventy questions. In this Lenten season, we are looking at just a sampling of those questions and asking ourselves, “what if some of the greatest teachings of Jesus came through the questions he asked?” As we journey through Lent to Easter, we are exploring Jesus’ questions by looking at

how people responded and what that means for us today. Last week, when Jesus was on the boat with his disciples amid a storm, he asked, “why are you afraid?” Like the disciples on the boat, we were reminded that the power and presence of the good news of Jesus will shape our lives as we make the crucial turn from fear to faith.

This week, the question that Jesus asks is, “who touched my clothes.” Our story this morning is a story within a story. Before we look at the story itself, this literary aspect of Mark is interesting – at least to me. To you, it might get your nap started a little earlier than usual. Many of you will be able to relate to the Gospel writer. Not asking for a show of hands but how many of you, when you start to tell a story, will get distracted and wander into another story – “chase a rabbit” as it were - before returning to the original story. That’s called intercalation (in-tur-kuh-**ley**-shuhn). Intercalations happen in lots of fields but it’s especially notable in science, like when a molecule is inserted (or intercalated) into layers of materials. One chemistry example, I learned, is graphite.<sup>1</sup> Let’s get back to Mark. (See what I did there? That was intercalation).

Perhaps it’s easier to understand intercalations in Mark if we just call it a Markan Sandwich – that’s really what it is. Story A starts – Story B comes along and is told – then we return to Story A. Story A is the bread on each side – Story B is the meat in between. Mark uses this technique as many as nine times in his Gospel. It is, to be sure, a literary technique, but its purpose is also theological. These sandwiches emphasize the major motifs of the Gospel, especially the meaning of faith, discipleship, bearing witness, and the risks of abandoning the faith.<sup>2</sup>

Today's story began back in verse 21 of the fifth chapter when Jesus disembarks from the boat on the other side of the sea. One of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus is there to meet Jesus. Jairus tells Jesus about his daughter who is near death. He begs Jesus to come to his house where his daughter is and make her well. And away they go...until they aren't going anymore. They go until our story for today pops up in the middle of their journey and interrupts where we thought we were headed.

A large crowd is following Jesus and is not giving him much space. Mark says that the people "pressed in on him." With that context, we are introduced to an unnamed woman. She has suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years. She has spent all of her money on a multitude of doctors who've been no help and the situation is worse instead of better. This is a woman who has lost all hope. Not only was she sick, but she was also alone. She did not have a male advocate like Jairus who was lobbying for her. This woman was an outcast – she was an outcast of the outcast. Let me read you just a portion of the Levitical law that would have applied to this woman.

"Every bed on which she lies during all the days of her discharge shall be treated as the bed of impurity; and everything on which she sits shall be unclean, as in the uncleanness of her impurity." (Leviticus 15:26). Let's be clear when Leviticus uses the word "unclean," it goes beyond what can be washed off. This is not just physically unclean but ritually unclean. This would have been this woman's life for 12 years.

This unnamed woman defines "desperation" – she defines what it means to be "at her wits end" – defines what it means to be "at the end of her rope." Can you sense that in her? Have you been there? Perhaps you feel like you are there now. Think about that lowest point in your life and then go lower and go there for twelve years. That's this woman. We all have our lowest of low times. Many years ago a young Midwestern lawyer suffered such deep depression that his friends thought it wise to keep all knives and razors from him. During this time the lawyer wrote, "I am now the most miserable man living. Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell. I awfully forebode I shall not."<sup>3</sup>

In 1908, Irish explorer Ernest Shackleton headed an Antarctic expedition attempting to reach the South Pole. They came closer than any before but, 97 miles short of the pole, had to turn back. In his diary Shackleton told of the time when their food supplies were exhausted save for one last ration of hardtack, a dried sort of biscuit, that was distributed to each man. Some of the men took snow, melted it, and made tea while consuming their biscuits.

Others, however, stowed the biscuits in their food sacks, saving it for the last moment of hungry desperation.<sup>4</sup>

The fire was built up, and weary, exhausted men climbed into their sleeping bags to face a restless sleep. Shackleton said he was almost asleep when out of the corner of his eye, he noticed one of his most trusted men sitting up in his bag and looking about to see if anyone was watching. Shackleton's heart sank within him as this man began to reach toward the food sack of the man next to him.

Just like Mark, I'll come back and give you the end of those stories in a few minutes. The people in each of these stories and the woman in our story are at the deepest point of desperation. In Mark, the juxtaposition of the sandwich stories is important. Jairus and the unnamed woman share only one thing in common: they both are victims of desperate circumstances, and apart from Jesus they have no hope. Otherwise their stories very different. Jairus has a name and holds an important position. He has enough prestige to ask Jesus to come to his house.

The woman can claim none of these. Her name is not known and she has no position in society. Her only identification is her shame, a menstrual hemorrhage. Whereas Jairus approaches Jesus face-to-face, she approaches Jesus from behind so she won't be seen. Despite her embarrassing condition, she pushes through the crowd, even past the disciples, hoping only to touch the back of Jesus' garment. And that she does.

She's heard of Jesus and knows that she cannot speak to him face to face so she touches his outer cloak from behind. At that point, always in a hurry, Mark starts two consecutive sentences with "immediately." The first is what happens to the woman, the following is what happens to Jesus.

First, the woman - "Immediately, her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease." (Mark 5:29).

Then, Jesus - "Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" (Mark 5:30).

And with that, we have our question - "who touched my clothes?" It is a question that baffles the disciples who were with him. "Jesus, do you see all these people - people are cramming around you like sardines and you expect us to know who touched your clothes?" But the woman comes before him with "fear and trembling" and tells Jesus the whole truth. Jesus takes this outcast and makes her a part of the family - did you catch that -

"Daughter," he calls her, "your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." (Mark 5:34). And with that, Mark takes us back to our regularly scheduled program – takes us back to the bread on the bottom of the sandwich and continues the story before he got sidetracked on ours.

What Jesus did for the woman – and Jairus' daughter on the bottom of our sandwich – can best be defined as "compassion." Like last week, he redirects their fear to faith and it is the faith that gives them hope in the future. It is faith, not fear, that will raise the daughter of Jairus to new life. It is faith, not fear, that will transform the life of this outcast, untouchable woman and give her hope and a future. It is a powerful glimpse into the compassion of Jesus.

Compassion means "coming with passion." The original meaning of passion is suffering with someone – "The Passion of the Christ" was the 2004 Mel Gibson movie about how Jesus suffered with and for us. Compassion is not pity. Pity lets us stay at a distance. Pity can be condescending. Compassion does not mean sympathy. Sympathy comes from someone superior to someone inferior. Compassion is not charity. Charity allows a rich person to stay in a position of power over a poor person. Compassion means standing in another person's shoes. Compassion means caring.

Compassion means genuine caring, going out to a person, entering into his or her suffering. Jesus is touched by the woman who touched him. That is caring. To care means to suffer with the other person. That's what the unnamed woman saw – a Jesus that cared. Jesus entered into her suffering. He communed with her. The slight touch on his robe amid a pushing, shoving, clamoring crowd did not go unnoticed. Jesus was aware of the trembling, outstretched fingers of an anonymous woman touching the hem of his garment. Are you surprised by that? You shouldn't be.

We are encouraged to believe that God is like that. We are encouraged in this story to come just as we are, even at our lowest, most desperate spots. God will begin with us wherever we are, if we will just come and trust him as much as we can. Over the years, I have often had people tell me that they cannot come to God just yet. Once they get over their drinking problem, once they straighten out their marriage, once they are not so sick and helpless, then they say they will come to God. The biblical corrective of the story of the woman is that we are to come just as we are and be healed by the compassionate healer.

Jesus' healings were more than physical cures. He healed the soul as well as the body. He felt the pain of the people. That is why Mark includes the detail that the power had gone out from Jesus. In other words, when the power of

God went into a person from Jesus for healing, Jesus himself was diminished. That is what coming with passion is all about. Compassion means being so deeply involved with others that you are spent. That is why Jesus was exhausted at the end of the day.

Let's wrap up the stories I've left hanging because I've gotten a bit distracted by telling this other story. The unnamed woman who we've been talking about most becomes close kin in the family of Jesus –daughter – not some long-lost cousin that you only see once a decade at a reunion but DAUGHTER! Jesus stood in her shoes with compassion and love.

What about those other stories? That Midwestern lawyer who suffered such deep depression that his friends thought it wise to keep all knives and razors from him? So deep in despair that he wrote - "I am now the most miserable man living. Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell." Well, that man did get better. He did recover. His name was Abraham Lincoln. In 1835, friends are credited with saving his life because they took turns staying with him so that he would not harm himself. They stood in his shoes with compassion and love.

What about the Antarctic expedition members who were out of rations? Ernest Shackleton was almost asleep when he noticed one of his most trusted men sitting up and looking about to see if anyone was watching. He watched the man reach toward the food sack of the man next to him only to witness that man taking the biscuit from his sack and putting it in the food sack of his fellow explorer. On the verge of starving himself, the man takes his last hard biscuit from his pack and sneaks it to a more desperate colleague. The man stood in the other man's shoes with compassion and love.

Jairus' daughter, even though it wasn't our story for today, has life because Jesus stood in the shoes of Jairus with compassion and love. Do you see the common theme? Compassion takes different forms but has the same definition – entering into another's suffering. I'm pretty good at thinking of ways other people can be compassionate. Maybe you share that gift with me. I think it's pretty easy for us to look around at the world, or our community, or even here at church and see ways that other people could be compassionate.

But what if? What if we saw what others could do to be compassionate but then choose to be the compassion-givers ourselves? When you start practicing compassion, you realize you will never stop, because there is plenty of suffering. Perhaps it is as Mother Teresa described: "I have found that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love."<sup>5</sup>

Maybe our compassion will, over time, decades, and centuries perhaps, begin to outweigh suffering so that all we see is love. May it begin with us. May it begin today.

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<sup>1</sup> Graphite example found on Wikipedia under Intercalation (chemistry), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intercalation\\_\(chemistry\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intercalation_(chemistry))

<sup>2</sup> Academic article by James R. Edwards titled Markan Sandwiches: The Significance of Interpolations in Markan Narratives. (Interpolation is a synonym of intercalation). Found at: [https://jbburnett.com/resources/mark/Edwards\\_Markan-Sandwiches.pdf](https://jbburnett.com/resources/mark/Edwards_Markan-Sandwiches.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Story about Abraham Lincoln is found in multiple sources. One is: *Today in the Word*, MBI, December, 1989, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Sala, Harold J., *Heroes: People Who Made a Difference in Our World*, Barbour Publishing, 1998, pp 277-278.

<sup>5</sup> Mother Teresa quote found at [www.brainyquote.com](http://www.brainyquote.com).