

Fourth Sunday after Trinity  
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Mark 5:21-end  
Baptism of Samuel Ferrard

A few weeks ago, there was some commotion in the Netherlands around a children's program on national television called 'gewoon bloot' (Just Naked). The program showed all different kinds of bodies -different sizes, shapes, colours- and children were then allowed to ask questions about these bodies. Apart from what you may think of showing naked bodies on television, there was a very valid reason behind it. In 2019, 8 out of 12 children calling the children's hotline in the Netherlands reported issues around body-image, insecurity and fear around bodies. By showing all these different types of body, the program hoped to normalize bodies and take away some of the shame, fear, and insecurities around it.

Shame and insecurity around bodies is not new for most living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We know how social media, photoshop, and the portrayal of bodies in general has caused an unrealistic and very specific expectation of how bodies should function and look like. However, body-image and high body expectations is not just a problem of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the ancient world there were also expectations of how a body should look like, expectations around good and bad bodies. In Aristotle we find an interesting description about the characteristics of these 'good' and 'bad' bodies. He writes that good bodies are strong, hard, dry, in control of their bodily boundaries, good balanced and well-regulated. 'Bad' or 'unhealthy' bodies, on the other hand, are cold, soft, porous, wet, excessive, and not in control of what goes in- or out of their bodies.

In other words, what Aristotle describes as a bad bodies are female, and what he describes as good bodies is male. According to him, women were never able to achieve a healthy or good body. Theirs was softer, colder, more moist, and they couldn't control what comes in- or out of their bodies. Therefore, he called women 'unfinished men'. One could thus say, there were clear expectations of bodies in the ancient world.

Also, Mark, from tonight's Bible passage, seems to be aware of these expectations. He even seems to play with the characteristics of 'good' and 'bad' bodies in this story.

Usually, the story of the woman with a flow of blood is explained in terms of the impurity and uncleanness that comes from this flow of blood. By touching Jesus, she is healed and thus made clean again, meaning she can take part in normal life again. However, although this is true, when we take into consideration the body-expectations of Jesus' time, there is also something else going on. The woman with the flow of blood is an example of a 'bad' body. As she is clearly not able to control what is coming in or going out of her body, there is an uncontrollable flow of blood, an excessive leaking.

But if we pay close attention to the text, we find there is someone who leaks uncontrollably. And this person is Jesus himself. Because there is a flow of power flowing from his body to hers, and it is only after the woman touches his garments that he is aware of it. Jesus doesn't seem to be in control of this flow of power. Thus, Mark seems to be mirroring the way the woman's body functions to the way Jesus' does. The flow of power is paralleled to the flow of blood, both

unable to control the flow going out of their bodies. And so, Jesus' body, according to ancient standards is, like this woman, a disabled, unhealthy, weak, and even feminine body.

And that doesn't sound very good, does it? Why would Mark want to compare Jesus' body to this shameful, weak woman?

Perhaps because in doing so, Mark shows how Jesus turns everything upside down – as he seems to be doing more often. In becoming similar to this woman's body, Jesus turns body-image and body expectations upside down. This woman's flow of shame and illness turns into a flow of healing power. And instead of shaming this shameful/bad body, he becomes like it. Instead of being in control of everything, he dares to let go, dares to become vulnerable, which ultimately leads to healing. And instead of having a well-regulated and balanced body, his excessive abundance, his pouring out of himself, becomes new life for this woman.

And so, the fact that Mark mirrors the bodies of Jesus, and the woman challenges the norms of what a body should look like or do. It shows that however her body functions, however others look at her, whatever social status she has because of her body, and however she looks at herself, Jesus creates a space for her to come just as she is.

But that Jesus is not in control, is also scary. Because Jesus is the son of God, right? Jesus weak?! How about his authority, power, and glory?

Of course, Jesus is all that. But I think the point Mark might be making is that his power becomes visible in his weakness. Because the Jesus who is the king of the world, was mistaken for a gardener as he rose from the grave. And it wasn't because he was wearing a crown and royal robes, but probably because there was dirt underneath his fingernails. And in this text, he becomes like a shameful woman's body. And it is just because of this weakness and vulnerability that he can come so uncomfortably close to us.

The theologian Jürgen Moltmann said: "God cannot love, if He cannot make himself vulnerable." In other words, without God becoming weak and vulnerable like us, he keeps hovering far above our heads. He remains far away. But in becoming similar to someone who is the archetype of weak and shameful, he creates space for her to come. He creates space for the shameful, broken, and hurt to come. And in his weakness Christ can become this excessive gift of God to us. By giving up control, by pouring himself out, he comes close.

And *that's* where this woman gets healed too. Because Jesus makes himself vulnerable, this woman is enabled to come close and touch him. By letting go of control, his healing power can flow to this woman's body. And then, on top of it all, he also calls her out of isolation, her loneliness, her exclusion, as he says "my daughter..."

"My daughter..." that is where her new life truly begins, she is sent into her new chapter as a daughter. That is also where Jesus' own sending into the world begins, at his baptism where the heavens open and God says, "my son, you are loved." And so, this woman's new chapter is inaugurated by these words "my daughter." Part of the family of Christ, and thus seen, known, and loved. No longer does her life revolve around shame, isolation, and weakness, she now belongs.

And also, *our* lives begin here, far before we could even begin to live up to this picture-perfect, instagrammable, life: "my son, my daughter, my child you are loved." Whoever you are,

whatever your body looks like, however it works, whether it makes you feel ashamed, however others look at you and however imperfect your life is, these are the words that echo through our lives from our baptism onto now.

These are the words at the beginning of our lives with God. They are our identity markers, welcoming us into the family of Christ. It is from these words that we are given new life, much like this woman, that we are born again.

Knowing we are loved changes everything. It means we don't have to be picture perfect, we don't have to present this cleaned up version of ourselves, we don't have to achieve the 'perfect' body, we don't have to live up to the expectations the world, others, or even ourselves, put on us. We are already loved.

Following in the example of someone who shows weakness is strength, who prefers to look like a gardener over a king, who hangs out with losers, and becomes like this woman's body, means also we can come just as we are, and despite our broken bodies and lives can touch him too. Amen.