

Risking Arm in Arm

Mark 5:21-43\*

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May the God...

Good morning! Former Duke Professor and Historian, John Hope Franklin, who died in 2009 at the age of 94 chronicled, decried and lived in the midst of racism in America. Not long before he died, he told a story of when he was a 12-year-old boy in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the 1920s.

*"It was my first year as a Boy Scout, and I am very, very excited about fulfilling all of the obligations of the Boy Scouts, and I've got so much enthusiasm and so much anxiety, that I just want to be the best Boy Scout I can possibly be."*

*"One of the admonitions that we had was that we had to do a good deed every day."* So, while standing at a street corner in downtown Tulsa, Franklin was looking for an opportunity to help when while waiting for the light to turn, he says.

*"I saw this woman as she was stepping off the curb - and she had a white cane and I thought, 'Oh my goodness, she can't see,' "*

*"And so I walked up to her and said 'Can I help you cross?' She says, 'Oh, yes, I'm so glad.' And she grabbed on my arm as though I was the last person on earth."*

*"We got about halfway across the street - and she's so happy and laughing and talking when suddenly she asks, 'Are you white or black?' And I told her I was colored, and she said, 'Get your filthy hands off of me,' and I got my hands off of her," Franklin said.*

Over the years, Franklin said that he had reflected on that moment:

*"That this woman, who could not see and who was in desperate need of help, was not as interested in help as she was in being certain that a young black man didn't touch her. And that if she couldn't see, she certainly couldn't know whether my hands were clean or dirty.*

It was a pivotal moment for a 12-year-old boy in Oklahoma, just 7 years after the Tulsa Race Massacre, a pivotal moment when a 12-year-old African American boy decided he wasn't going to let society determine if he had value, or where he fit in this world. He decided that the prevailing social mores of the day would not define him.

Not a far cry from the unnamed woman who dares to reach for Jesus.

For twelve long years the woman bled. Not monthly, but daily. She breathed and she bled. Ritually unclean, liturgically outcast, socially unwanted. All her money spent on doctors, but to no avail - no potion, no herb, no prayer could staunch the flow. For twelve years she bled and lived her life on the edge -*persona non grata* to those who knew and fearful of those who had yet to find out.

From the surface she looked as you and I but underneath she held her secret. Then came the day - the day Jesus came to town. She had heard talk of his ability to heal to cure. She had heard them say that he just might be something more than a wonder worker, more than a prophet. That he might be the One- the Holy One. She knows she's not 'supposed' to be there. Her very presence in public is unacceptable - she's unclean. The rules say she can't worship in her condition, she can't even touch other people without making them unclean as well.

But she's not going to let society or religious law determine her value, her place. She's had enough of that. Twelve long years of that. There has to be something more.

And so, into the crowd she goes, claiming her ability to belong with hundreds around. She pushes her way through- willfully violating the laws and customs, touching others, rubbing her garments against theirs, making countless ones ritually unclean- and still she pushes on until the hem of Jesus' robe, the edge of his garment is within her grasp.

She reaches, she touches, as if he is the last person on earth. She pulls, and then she stops. In that instant, that tangible moment, the bleeding stops. Jesus, who feels the power go out of him says, "Who is it-who is it who has touched me?"

The apostles jostled about by the sea of humanity all around roll their eyeballs in disbelief, "Master-look around there are hundreds. Who knows who has touched you." But Jesus, ever insistent, longing to recognize the one who took the risk, the one who has claimed some of his power says again, "Who is it who touched me?" The woman, realizing that no more can she be hidden kneels before him for all to see and tells her story for all to hear and ends-by declaring with tears of relief in her eyes, "But now-I bleed no more."

She's done the unthinkable. Broken the purity laws. Touched them, contaminated them, made them, made JESUS unclean. She has violated the societal norms of the day.

Jesus could have said, "Get your filthy hands off me," and religious law would have agreed. But instead, their eyes connect. Jesus looks at her with understanding, compassion, and love. "Your faith- the risk you took- has made you well. Go in Peace."

The bleeding woman takes a huge risk, because like 12-year-old John Franklin, no one but God will tell her her value, her place.

Jesus makes it clear, Jesus who teaches us again and again that his Kingdom is for everyone. Jesus makes it clear her place is with Him. She who has been at the margins for 12 long years belongs right in the middle of God's Kingdom.

No one is to be left out. No one has less value than another. None of us has filthy hands. There is room for all with this itinerant prophet named Jesus.

The bleeding woman looked in Jesus' eyes and knew it was true.

12-year-old John Hope Franklin also knew it was true.

When the blind woman from Oklahoma grabbed young Franklin's arm as if he was the last person in the world, it was a moment of vulnerability and mutual connection, a glimmer of the Kingdom – how God longs for us to be with one another. Think about it—as a person without sight—she too would have found herself on the margins—regardless of her skin color. Because the world, we do that to each other—often not intentionally but it happens. If the world says you are different, then the world makes you stand apart.

If only the blind woman could have stayed in that moment, with young Franklin, she could have discovered, deep down in her soul, that her views, her ways of deciding who matters, who is in and who is out, were wildly flawed. If she had stayed in that moment, she might have begun to see herself as John Franklin saw himself, or as the bleeding woman saw herself as beloved, clean, worthy, valuable.

The blind woman would have found herself smack dab in the middle of the Kingdom of God next to a faithful twelve-year old boy, both from the margins, now in the middle.

I can't help but think if we can imagine ourselves as God sees us, then we can begin to see each other in the same way. And when we are able to view the world with

God's eyes, well, we might find we're walking across the street arm in arm with the most unexpected folks, laughing and listening, talking and hearing, helping each other find the way, so much more enlivening than being separated and staring with distrust across the political polarities and divides.

We could dare to walk together and discover that even our 21<sup>st</sup> century versions of ranking who's valuable, who's worthy, who's clean, and who's not starts to erode. We might just discover the beginning of the Kingdom of God. On this summer morning my friends imagine what our world will be like, when we begin to take the risk.

Amen.