

Disability and Healing in the Gospels

By Layla Weiss

“Like many disabled people, I am often approached by Christians who want to pray for me to be healed,” explains Damon Rose in a BBC article¹ entitled *Stop Trying to “Heal” Me*. Rose notes that “while they may be well-intentioned, these encounters often leave me feeling judged as faulty and in need of repair.” Why do some Christians react to disability and healing in this manner? According to the article, those who offer healing do so because, “in the Gospels, Jesus healed the sick and commanded his disciples to do the same.” (BBC) In Mark 5:23-34, disability is portrayed as a burden, and healing, when elected, is the means to overcome that burden. In this essay, I will analyze how this bible verse in particular depicts the relationship between disability and healing powered by gendered agency through event sequence, word-choice, and body politics.

In the Bible, examples of female agency are not always evident. In fact, Biblical patriarchy has been condemned for standing by certain beliefs that demean and objectify women. In Mark 5:23-34, a woman suffering from hemorrhages elects to heal her disability. After hearing about Jesus’ healing powers, she “came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.’ Immediately her hemorrhage stopped.” (Mark 5:28) This interaction incites many questions regarding gender politics. Why is *the healed* a woman and not a man? Why does the woman seek healing? Why doesn’t the woman ask Jesus for permission before healing herself? These questions can be addressed by examining the

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-48054113>

story's sequence of events. In the synoptic gospel Matthew 9:20-22, the order of events is reversed and it is Jesus that heals the woman as he says "'Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.' And instantly the woman was made well." (Matthew 9:22) In this passage, the storyteller has removed the woman's agency; it now appears as though she is asking Jesus' permission to be healed. In contrast, Mark 5:23-34 portrays healing as a choice, which is indicative of the woman's agency and control over her healing. Additionally, it is crucial to note that only she has been healed regardless of the fact that "[...] the crowd [is] pressing on [Jesus]." (Mark 5:31) Whereas others had touched Jesus, it seems only those who desire to be healed are healed. These two examples of sequence variation prove that in this bible verse, it was intended for the woman to exercise agency in her personal healing process.

While the sequence of events is crucial to unveiling the meaning behind Mark 5:23-34 as it concerns healing, specifically regarding gendered agency, so is word-choice. The New Testament was originally written in the first century in Greek. Therefore, scholars have questioned if word-choice during translation has tainted the intended original meaning of the text. In the translation of Mark 5:23-34, the use of the word *pressing* holds a different connotation than the word *touching* for example. Had the translator swapped the word *touching* for *pressing*, the reader would assume that the crowd had been actively touching Jesus, and consequently electing to heal themselves. Under that assumption, the argument of female agency would not stand. Disability activist and author, Margaret Moers Wenig espoused the importance of connotation with her proclamation that "a broken teacup is not a flawed example of a teacup but a perfect example of a broken teacup." (Wenig, p.130) Perspective driven by word-choice or simply by looking at something through a different lense can alter the original intended meaning

behind a statement. For example, In the musical performance *Guide Gods*, Claire Cunningham made a choice to use teacups to represent the bodies of disabled people in order to embody the individual's fragility, both physically and spiritually. Therefore, storytelling choices are paramount to the underlying significance of healing narratives like that of Mark 5:23-34.

There is a clear distinction made between the abled body and the disabled body in Cunningham's piece, where fragility is depicted through teacups; however, in Mark 5:23-34, both the woman and Jesus seem to experience a similar lack of control over their bodies that would otherwise be seen as a female fault. In *The Man with the Flow of Power: Porous Bodies in Mark 5:23-34* (Journal of Biblical Literature 129:3), Candida Moss' analysis of Mark's verse suggests that it messes with conventional power associations of body politics. Moss points out that Mark 5:23-34 ascribes more masculine traits to the disabled once healed, which is in line with antiquity's view of the female body -- incomplete compared to that of a man's. However, despite this, there is a clear similarity distinguished between Jesus and the woman's body. In fact, "while the woman becomes dried, hardened, and more masculine, the Markan protagonist qua physician (aka Jesus) remains porous, leaky, and effeminate." (Moss) Therefore, "both Jesus and the woman appear porous, unregulated, and weak. Porosity, however, is not de facto a negative. The leakiness of the body of Jesus and the "fear and trembling" of the woman may have suggested -- to those familiar with such myths -- that Jesus is divine." (Moss) It appears that Jesus' body has softened due to the uncontrollable flow of power escaping from his corps. Both Jesus and the woman have less control over their flows and therefore a bodily connection has been made between the two that challenges the traditional body politics of the era and of divinity in general.

In Mark 5:23-34, both traditional body power structures and female oppression have been challenged through the author's story-telling choices and the portrayal of similarities between the woman and Jesus. In modern times, the woman's use of Jesus in her healing can be equated to her search of an alternative health care system with the body of Jesus as a vector -- free and accessible -- to the expensive and ineffective physicians the woman has already visited.