

The Tenderness of God

Our world is calloused and cracked, and every day, it seems like more and more people are crying out for some relief, crying out for salvation.

Each day seems to bring more challenges, more chaos, more confrontations with the ugliness that is still in the water of our modern world. Time and again, it seems like we get close to something beautiful, as a society and a species. Yet, time and again, that hope is squandered, and we find new ways to divide the world. New ways to separate people, rendering some clean and unclean. New ways to monopolize economies so that some have more and some have less. New ways to use the world's callousness as a weapon to hurt, when, if we all just stopped a moment to think about our shared humanity, we could realize that we are all in need of the same tenderness, the same grace, mercy, and love. We all share the same pain, the same needs, the same voice crying out within us all, "This world is too much!" Yet, so many still choose to use their own pain as a weapon to inflict misery on somebody else. Maybe you're not guilty of this. But you can see that this is the way the world works, and hopefully you can agree with me when I say something's gotta give.

What we need, what we all need the world over...we see it on display in this Holy Gospel. Two stories of unbelievable tenderness. Two stories of a wandering rabbi offering broken people the chance to heal, the chance to transcend the horror they have endured. Place yourselves, if you can, into the shoes of the bleeding woman. Try, for a moment, to feel her feelings. She's not named in the Gospel, which means we can only speak of her by her malady, by reducing her to her pain. But our friends in the Orthodox East have given her a name, and thus a certain sort of dignity: Veronica. Veronica, a beloved child of God, suffered

embarrassment for 12 long years. More than embarrassment, her constant bleeding rendered her ritually unclean. She couldn't worship in the synagogues or the temple. She couldn't go to sleep at peace with her God, because all the manuscripts and religious leaders around her reminded her constantly that she was unclean, broken beyond repair, a cast-off unworthy of the God of Israel.

Imagine the pain she felt every night, both physical and emotional. Imagine the strength she had to muster to enter the common spaces where all would have known who she was, and that she was to be avoided at all costs. Imagine the courage it took for her to walk towards Jesus, worried that with every step she would have been found out. She grasped for the only one she thought could save her. And when that power flowed out of him, into her, healing her and setting her on her way, what did he do? Did he shame her for touching him? Did he chastise her for making him unclean, for even innocent contact with a bleeding woman would have rendered anybody else ritually unclean too?

None of this. In that moment, Jesus extended to her the tenderness of God, and it changed her forever. *He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."*

Daughter. He called her something her heart needed to hear. He affirmed her as not just a person, but *his* person. She wasn't just a friend or fellow beloved of God. She was his *family*. And into the heart of this more-than-stranger, the tenderness of God coursed through his cloak. The tenderness of God offered her more than the world's callousness and rejection. It offered her a way out of her pain into a better tomorrow. It offered her life!

This same tenderness, this same life, coursed into the dead body of Jairus' daughter. It coursed, too, into the grieving heart of Jairus' himself. Again, Jesus put himself at risk of being seen as unclean, for to touch a dead body was to be rendered unclean and unfit for holy things. Yet, he pushed past any barriers, social or otherwise, to manifest God's tenderness to this family in their most desperate hour. He looked into Jairus's heart and offered him what was most needed: **hope**. *When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping.* In that moment, Jesus didn't just bring the daughter back to life. He brought the whole family back from the abyss of despair. Jesus, the supreme manifestation of God, the full manifestation of God, taking the time to gaze into the eyes of a grieving father and saying, "It's okay. I'm here with you. It's okay. I love you."

Tenderness isn't a virtue on display much these days, and it's certainly not a virtue lifted up by those in power. Yet each and every one of you possesses this same tenderness on display in the Gospel, has the same potential to meet the wounded and the calloused of the world and model a different way to be human, a way that pushes through all the static, all the noise, and begins to bind up the broken-hearted.

It isn't the power and might of God which has saved us. It was God's tenderness through the life and wonderworking of Jesus of Nazareth. It was the tenderness that restored outcasts to the community, that restored the dead to life, that bound up the grief of a father at his absolute end. This tenderness led him to the cross and thereby shared this tender power with all those who would follow in his name.

Be tender in this harsh, hard world. Love all those around you as Jesus did! And dare to bring others back to life with the tender power of Jesus Christ, which flows through **you**, but only if you **choose** to make it so.