

July 1, Ordinary 13B (Mark 5:21-43)

## **The woman's presence in a crowd is an act of civil disobedience.**

by [Willie Dwayne Francois III](#) in the [June 6, 2018](#) issue

After each visit to a physician she returned to an alienating home, because the very problems that required the loving touch of a person also prevented it. Twelve years of this comes to a reinvigorating halt when she reaches for Jesus' garment. One rebellious reach puts an end to 12 years of alienation and loss. The story pivots on the power of this act of social defiance and righteous discontent.

The woman's status as unclean alienates her physically from family and friends. Other people need to avoid contact with her body, her used clothing, and the places where she sits and sleeps. Yet here she is, part of a crowd of people pressing in on Jesus. Her presence is an act of civil disobedience.

She has expended her life savings on doctors. Now her story bears out that it is costlier to follow rigid rules than to prioritize the hunger of the spirit. Scores of people miss God because of the blinding mechanics of religion. Yet faith—a complex praxis of life—transcends religion. Following religious proscriptions more strictly would have cost this woman healing.

I believe this is the seed Dietrich Bonhoeffer planted in the field of theological thinking when he referred to "religionless" Christianity. "The key to everything is the 'in him,'" he writes in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. "All that we may rightly expect from God and ask him for is to be found in Jesus Christ. The God of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with what God, as we imagine him, could do and ought to do. If we are to learn what God promises, and what he fulfills, we must persevere in quiet meditation on the life, sayings, sufferings, and death of Jesus." Religious Christianity, in contrast, allies the faith movement of Jesus with the power of the state—a context of loveless power and powerless love.

The woman's sickness taught her body how to negotiate the bodies around her and the bodily practices of propriety her presence required. This is akin to the way enslaved Africans negotiated the presence of white owners, or the way nonwhite youth relate to police. Purity rules can draft boundary lines, solidifying a dialectic of inclusion and exclusion. Our institutions and our lived values proscribe places for people, all in service of myths of superiority and power.

But when she reaches for Jesus, the woman claims her presence and her humanity. She is healed—and she no longer has to seek healing within a health-care system that has taken both her money and her wellness. Though the investment of every denarius she possessed proved counterproductive, she manages to endow hope in another option: the rumors she has heard in a crowd, in a setting that problematizes her very presence. Her will to live and be whole outweighs what she has suffered. She demonstrates a resilient reach.

There's an irony in this miracle story. The unclean woman interrupts a person who represents her exclusion: Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. On the way to his estate, where his daughter teeters on the edges of sickness and death, Jairus observes the healing consequences of the woman's rebellious reach—bodily wholeness and emotional security. The creative forces of justice place her transformation on display, disrupting power dynamics and defying the logic of superiority. Because of her rebellious reach, the unclean woman claims dignity, wholeness, and a future—all in the presence of a religious elite.

Rosa Parks had a rebellious and resilient reach. The civil rights era luminary sparked a campaign in Alabama that ricocheted across the United States. In 1943, James Blake, a white bus driver in Montgomery, ejected Parks from a bus after she refused to reenter through the rear. Rather than comply with segregationist logic, she defiantly opted to wait in the rain for the next bus to arrive. Twelve years later, Parks boarded another Montgomery public bus and encountered the same driver, who told her to relocate to the back of the bus to accommodate a white passenger. In what became known as Parks's cardinal act of resistance, she refused, and Blake called the police, leading to her arrest—and igniting the Montgomery Bus Boycott, 381 days of collective resistance to Jim Crow economics.

After the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against bus segregation and the boycott ended, Blake's bus intersected with Parks's itinerary for a third time. Parks boarded an integrated public bus to pose for media coverage of the landmark decision. In a tone

of poetic justice, the same bus driver who left her in the rain in 1943 and instigated her arrest in 1955 had to drive her as she legally sat in the front of the bus. As with the unnamed woman in Mark 5, Rosa Parks's resilience placed her progress on display in the presence of a custodian of the status quo.

Resilient, rebellious reaches threaten the logic of exclusion and the politics of purity. Harriet Tubman built an underground railroad. Nannie Helen Burroughs reshaped education for black women and girls. Jarena Lee preached the gospel in a sexist church. Ida B. Wells exposed the atrocities of American lynching. Fannie Lou Hamer, who was "sick and tired of being sick and tired," changed the Democratic Party. Ava DuVernay created space in Hollywood for untold American stories. We have to keep reaching for moral high ground and for justice. Your next reach may shift the history of the world.