

Touching the Fringes

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Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

I once made our daughter a costume to match the Native American dress worn by her doll Kaya (yes, that would be of the American Girl juggernaut). The final step in the costume's construction was to take my good fabric scissors and cut fringes along the sleeves, hem, and collar of the tan faux suede dress. It was a thing of beauty, if I do say so myself. Never before, and never since, have I made such a grand costume. (It fits an elementary aged girl, in case anyone needs to borrow it.)

In the world of fashion and textiles, fringes come and go. Fringes and tassels were all the rage in home décor about the time we were settling in to our new home back in the Buffalo area. As I planned the new window treatments and pillows I was going to make, my neighbor directed me to a discount fabric warehouse where I could find hundreds of versions at an affordable price. Find them I did – a glorious array of colors and lengths of yarns and threads to trim out to my heart's content.

According to the Huffington Post, fringe was all over the New York Fashion Week runways this past spring, and therefore, I'm told, should be appearing this fall in a store near you. From dresses to scarves, ponchos to jackets, metallic fringe, short fringe, long fringe – there it is, evoking that 60's and 70's vibe...or the flappers' vibe from the 1920's, or maybe even a first century Jewish vibe.

Now, I strongly suspect the fringe on Jesus' cloak was not a fashion statement, but typical of the tassels Jewish males had on the corners of their garments. And here it is - an intriguing detail in an episode that is sparse in nearly every other respect. It's curious, I think...for Mark's story is an urgent, even frenzied one. There is no time to linger, no time to take a rest (in spite of good intentions), no time to dwell on the details - except for the fringe of Jesus' clothing.

Jesus and his disciples dock their boat at Gennesaret, and "people" at once recognize him. People? Who are they? Old? Young? Important? Or not? They're simply "people" who know him immediately. The news rapidly goes viral, and "people" rush about and bring "the sick" to him. The sick – we're short on details here, too. What's the nature of their sickness? Is it physical, or mental, or spiritual? Are they sick in the way we think of medical illness? Is it a collection of biological symptoms? Or is their illness social in nature - where they are cut off from the rest of society? Have they been sick all their lives, or has their well-being suddenly taken a turn for the worse? What's wrong with them? There is no time for other details - "people" urgently rush "the sick" to Jesus.

We all know there's a substantial difference between false urgency and true urgency. I experienced a great deal of false urgency in my former little corner of the corporate world. Certain bosses in particular (no one you'd know) were frequent practitioners of false urgency, often as a result of really poor planning! It would tend to appear somewhere between 5:30pm-6pm, usually as I was thinking about grabbing my coat and car keys to head out the door. Maybe you've seen the sign that says, "Poor planning on your part doesn't make it an emergency on my part." Let me tell you from my experience of too many midnights at the office, that didn't generally apply to my bosses!

But this is not that! The need in Gennesaret is truly urgent, with no time to waste - the need for infected wounds to be cleaned and healed, for rampant disease to sputter and die off, for the pain of grief to subside, for relationships torn apart to be made whole, for outcasts to be restored into their rightful place in the community. Wherever Jesus goes - into villages, cities, farms - in the most public of places they beg, they beg, and they beg him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak. Just one thread.

They are desperate, and somehow deep down inside, they know - somehow people who have no previous relationship with Jesus know that if they can just strain and stretch to get near him, something will get better. Somehow they know they need whatever it is that his presence will bring.

And what he brings is healing. All who touched it were healed. All who touched it were made whole. All. Cameron Murchison says "this suggests that the reign of God manifest in Jesus does not have to be fully and uniquely focused on a particular person to be powerfully at work in the situation. Just as there is collateral damage in human warfare," he writes, "there appears to be collateral wholeness in God's restorative presence manifest in Jesus." Collateral wholeness.

I've heard Robert Perelli, a Roman Catholic priest and licensed family therapist, speak about his professional experience with parents who come to him with a so-called "problem child" and say, "Fix my kid." He says, "I don't want to talk about the kid right now. I first want to talk about what's going on between the parents. If we deal with that, the kid will start to get better." Collateral wholeness.

And where one person suffers from something such as an addiction or depression, chances are that person's whole circle of loved ones is in pain. And when that person is healed of that affliction, it brings the possibility of healing and restoration for all whose lives touch that person. Collateral wholeness.

In every Sunday service of worship, as we pray a collective prayer of confession, and offer a time of silence for personal confession, we acknowledge we're all broken in some way. Even though we may hide it well from the public eye, we're all in need of Christ's healing somewhere. And where we're healed brings the possibility and even promise of collateral wholeness.

One of my seminary professors, James Evans, said many times that our language for God is always partial and incomplete. By extension, our language for the church and its place in the kingdom of God is also always partial and incomplete. The bride of Christ, the body of Christ, and the family of God are some metaphors for the church that come to mind.

Then this week, as I read commentaries on today's text, several that suggested that the church is (or ought to be) the fringe of Jesus' garment - the presence of Christ through Word and sacrament and prayer and ministry to those in need. The hymn, "Draw Us in the Spirit's Tether" makes that same suggestion. (Page 529 in the hymnal, first verse). *"Draw us in the Spirit's tether, for when humbly in your name two or three are met together, you are in the midst of them. Alleluia, alleluia! Here we touch your garment's hem."*

It got me thinking about one of the things I've been spending time on recently. Both for Third Church Outreach and Great Schools for All, that's been figuring out how best to organize ourselves to do the work we've been called to do. My inner nerd happily uses SmartArt graphics to create organization charts to help me figure out the options - what's not to love about boxes and lines and an orderly sense of structure - which group does what; who's responsible to whom; what are the lines of communication; what are the relationships that are inherent in the work we do.

At one level it's been helpful. At the same time, it's static, and seems wholly inadequate to capture the ever-moving dimensions of ministry. So even though every organizational bone in our bodies may scream in resistance, maybe it's then time to ditch the charts, go for something a little more creative, and take our place on the fringe that moves in concert with the movement of Christ.

I wonder what it means for the church to be the fringe of Christ's cloak and at the same time be those who are reaching ourselves to touch the fringe? I think of the Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, where nine were killed a few short weeks ago. I think of that church's unspeakable pain and grief that so desperately needs Christ's healing touch, while at the same time those wounded souls embodied the very presence of Jesus through their extension of forgiveness.

I think of people who come during the week to this place to find relief from their struggles, and at the same time offer words of hope to others who are also struggling.

They are two sides of the same: A church full of people reaching for forgiveness, called to extend Jesus' forgiving presence; a church full of people desperate to be loved, called to extend Jesus' loving presence; a church full of people longing to be reconciled, called to extend Jesus' reconciling presence; a church full of people begging to be healed, called to extend Jesus' healing presence.

And somehow - through the One, there is collateral wholeness for all. Amen.