

## HEALING TOUCH

*When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." So he went with him.*

*And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him.*

*Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and 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; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?' " 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."*

*Mark 5: 21-34*

I mentioned last week that as the storm of the pandemic year begins to settle down and the danger recedes in the rearview mirror, one of the things that many people are eager to return to is human contact—or, as I put it last week, hugging anyone with arm's reach who will stand still long enough.

And you have to admit that while our non-contact, stay-in-place passing of the peace is a necessary and wise precaution—it's just not the same. Holding out our hands to each other when we sing God be with you is a moving gesture, but it doesn't really replace reaching out and joining hands with someone nearby.

Have you been missing that sense of touch and being touched by others? I know for some of us, it hasn't been that bad; our default mode is to maintain a buffer zone of personal space. But others of us have a deep need for close contact—a handshake just doesn't do the trick.

But what if there is more to human touch than hugging or shaking hands? What if touch is more about breaking down the barriers that wall us off from those who are around us? I wonder if there are ways to dismantle those walls, to break down those barriers that go beyond literal, physical contact.

In Mark's story of this un-named woman who sidles up to Jesus, she doesn't even touch him; she just touches his clothes. And what happens after that touch raises some questions. What was the cause of this hemorrhage, and how did it come to an end from just touching the cloak of Jesus? Our modern, Western, enquiring minds want to analyze, demythologize, and deconstruct this phenomenon and reduce it to terms we can quantify. We want an explanation that will make us more comfortable with the creeping suspicion that something supernatural may be going on here. We want to know where the magician hides the rabbit that appears out of the hat.

But it is often the case with the stories in the gospels that when we try so hard to reduce them down to the mechanics we miss the deeper truth and wisdom they contain. What happened in the touch between the un-named woman and Jesus goes beyond the healing of the flow of blood; it even goes beyond the physical contact that was made.

What is it that matters most to Mark in the telling of this story?

First, it matters that we understand the circumstances that brought this woman to such an act of desperation. It is important that we realize that in the culture of 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism, she was about as isolated as a person could get. According to the Priestly Code found in the Book of Leviticus, a woman who had such a flow of blood was in a state of ritual impurity, and continued in that state of impurity for as long as the flow of blood continued. This was not meant as a comment on her moral purity or even to say that she was physically unclean.

What it did mean was that her condition not only excluded her from any religious activity in the temple or synagogue, but would also have contaminated or defiled anyone who she touched or who touched her; anyone who lay on a bed in which she slept; anyone who sat on a chair she had sat on, anyone who handled a cup or dish that she had touched. I would imagine that after twelve years, friends and relatives, maybe even a spouse had grown tired of the ritual cleansings that were required even after such casual contact. It was probably easier for them just to avoid any contact at all.

In the bold and daring action of a ritually unclean, unaccompanied woman touching a man in public, she crossed about as many social, cultural and religious barriers as a person could cross in one simple act. Fred Craddock comments: “The law was clear; in her own home, in society, and at the synagogue she was an outsider. That the woman crossed the ritual barriers by being in the crowd and by touching Jesus and that Jesus both healed her and gave her a blessing are not at all to be taken as mocking the law. The point here is that with reference to the healing and helping power of God, there are no barriers.” (*Luke, Interpretation*, p. 119)

But a second thing that matters to Mark is for everyone to know what went on, that this touch is not a secret or a private act. It is crucial to the impact of the narrative to see that Jesus gave equal attention to an anonymous shunned woman as to a prominent religious leader whose name is familiar to everyone. You can imagine the impact this incident had on Jairus.

As a leader of the synagogue, he was, if not fully responsible, at least complicit in the isolation of this woman from the synagogue. And then for Jesus to take the time to listen to this woman’s story of twelve years of suffering and isolation and shame and to pronounce a blessing on her, and most importantly, to call her “daughter” – you can just imagine the changed way that he viewed this woman from then on. *She* was also someone’s daughter. And if it changed his perspective on this woman, maybe it also opened his eyes to other invisible people in his own community.

The public nature of this story, the fact that Jesus calls her out and takes the time to listen to her story, to publicly acknowledge the taboos that were broken and then in spite of it all to pronounce her healed and to affirm her faith and to give her his blessing—all of these things come together in this touch which does more than restore her to good physical health. It restores her place in the community, in her family, in the synagogue. It is an act of wholeness—of *shalom*.

I certainly do not want to rule out or dismiss God's power to work healing in ways that go beyond our present understanding, but I do want to suggest that there is more going on in this story than pathology. It may be that this is not so much a story about some kind of magical, mystical cure as it is about the power of healing human touch that goes deeper than the abrasions to our outer body, that touches us in places where hurts originate and often where they linger and fester. And there is a healing power that comes not just from literal, physical contact, but even more from dismantling walls that divide us and breaking down barriers that insulate us from the suffering of others.

I often wonder what deep pains we bring here week after week, and how does the church offer a healing touch that embraces and validates and graces and nurtures? In what way is the church called to be the healing touch that a hurting world, a hurting community needs? And even more I wonder what ways do we need to be open to the touch of *others*, the anonymous ones who suffer in silence and isolation right here in our own community? What barriers are we going to have to dismantle in order to open a way for them to move out of their isolation, to be named as a daughter or son, a brother or sister, and be incorporated into the community? What traditions are in place now that insulate us from the outside world and at the same time isolate those that are not already one of us? And what should we do when do these traditions become more sacred than welcoming in those on the margins?

These are questions that those who witnessed the encounter between Jesus and the anonymous woman had to ask themselves, and those questions linger into our own time. But it is clear that there is a healing power in the kind of touch that goes beyond physical contact, the kind of touch that brings healing to hurts that go deeper than our flesh wounds, the kind of touch that restores us to the wholeness that God desires for everyone born.

Ann Weems wrote a prayer in the form of a poem she calls "Touch in Church." May it be our prayer today.

*What is all this touching in church?*

*It used to be a person could come to church and sit in the pew  
and not be bothered by all this friendliness and certainly not by touching.*

*I used to come to church and leave untouched.*

*Now I have to be nervous about what's expected of me.*

*I have to worry about responding to the person sitting next to me.*

*Oh, I wish it could be the way it used to be;*

*I could just ask the person next to me:*

*How are you? And the person could answer: Oh, just fine,*

*And we'd both go home . . . strangers who have known each other for twenty years.*

*But now the minister asks us to look at each other.*

*I'm worried about that hurt look I saw in that woman's eyes.*

*Now I'm concerned, because when the minister asked us to pass the peace,  
the man next to me held my hand so tightly I wondered if he had been touched in years.*

*Now I'm upset because the lady next to me cried and then apologized*

*and said it was because I was so kind*

*and that she needed a friend right now.*

*Now I have to get involved.*

*Now I have to suffer when this community suffers.  
Now I have to be more than a person coming to observe a service.  
That man last week told me I'd never know how much I'd touched his life.  
All I did was smile and tell him I understood what it was to be lonely.  
Lord, I'm not big enough to touch and be touched!  
The stretching scares me.  
What if I disappoint somebody?  
What if I'm too pushy?  
What if I cling too much?  
What if somebody ignores me?  
"Pass the peace."  
"The peace of God be with you." "And with you."  
And mean it.  
Lord, I can't resist meaning it!  
I'm touched by it, I'm enveloped by it!  
I find I do care about that person next to me!  
I find I am involved!  
And I'm scared.  
O Lord, be here beside me.  
You touch me, Lord, so that I can touch and be touched!  
So that I can care and be cared for!  
So that I can share my life with all those others that belong to you!  
All this touching in church – Lord, it's changing me!*

*(from Reaching for Rainbows, 35-36)*

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