

The Healing Touch

5 – Following Jesus for Life

Mark 5:1-20

Psalms 147:1-11

Mark 5:21-43

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There is healing power in the touch of faith. Simple touch can be healing touch. Appropriately extended touch can speak volumes beyond our words, and let the other person know we love and care and they matter. So much in our culture showcases inappropriate vulgar touch, touch that violates a person, or abuses a child, that we tend away from any sort of appropriate caring touch altogether. When a person is feeling lonely, isolated, dejected, the simple touch of our hand with theirs, the simple meeting of our eyes with theirs, the appropriate hug can say, you are important to me, you are important to God, you are not alone, and it is going to be all right.

This evening, in Indianapolis, I assure you there will be lots of touching, pats and hugs, hand slaps andatta boys. Grown men will throw their arms around one another. Perfect strangers will hug the people seated near them. Why is it sports teams and sports fans seem to be able to touch in these restoring celebrative ways, but sometimes we do not do such a good job of it in Christian worship or Christian community?

Each person is different, some of us are very touchy-feely physical, some of us do not go for the casual hug. When I was in Kentucky one Sunday I spontaneously asked everyone to hold hands in the pews during the Lord's Prayer. Something which, by the way, the Roman Catholic Church does in most every Sunday mass. One of my dear friends, a man who owned a large asphalt company that paved most of the highways in central Kentucky, came up to me afterwards and said, "Now you can just forget all that holdy holdy hand during the prayer!"

That man, Monie Beard, was a huge Bowling Green High School Purples football team supporter who had put many of the under privileged team members through college, and I assure you that on Friday nights he had no trouble with holdy holdy hand! But it is OK that he did not want to hold hands during prayer because what I am talking here about something much more than the physical. I am talking about the spiritual connection, and how often our physical expressions to others get the spiritual across, body, mind and spirit – together whole. We all need the healing touch, for making the cosmic and the community connection.

We are considering today, from the fifth chapter of Mark, Jesus' healing touch, as experienced by a deranged man, by a long-suffering woman with a blood disease, and by a dead little girl. Three healing stories, two of which overlap.

First, Jesus is simply present with a shunned outcast among the tombs, no actual physical touch recorded, but Jesus spiritually touches him by noticing this man everyone else ran away

from, engaging with him and healing him of the multiple personalities that brought madness to his body.

Second, a double healing, a healing within a healing on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. As Jesus is on the way to help the deathly ill daughter of an important Jewish synagogue official, a nameless woman who has been suffering from a blood hemorrhage for 12 years touches him. This woman has suffered for as many years as the little girl he is going to help has been alive. The woman is healed simply by her audacious faith as she reaches out and touches Jesus.

Then, the third healing comes as he reaches out and takes the hand of a dead little girl, calling her back to life, as simply as her parents might tell her to wake up on a sunny summer morning, "Little girl, get up!" he says, and she does. The power of the Master's touch. Healing touch, healing words, and everything changes.

There is a deep yearning in our world today for such healing, restoring, uniting touch. Last Sunday John Buchanan, who is also Editor of the Christian Century Magazine, retired after 26 ½ years as pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church, along Michigan Avenue in Chicago, a city center church not unlike South Highland. He said in one of his last sermons earlier in January,

"There is growing evidence that American culture is sick of religion that divides, judges, casts out, keeps out, and it longs for a religion that reconciles, affirms, accepts, a religion that simply, profoundly, in every way holds to the good."

Jesus does this. He holds in every way to the good as he travels across Galilee touching and healing hurting people, bringing wholeness where there is brokenness. His healing touch and our healing touch, extended in his name and as a reflection by faith of what he is doing in our lives and in our circles, is needed today in very diverse places, transcending the barriers we erect with the cleansing healing touch of grace.

It was encouraging to read recently of the uncharacteristic civility expressed to Gabby Gifford during President Obama's State of the Union Address. The Arizona Democratic Congresswoman, who was shot in the head during a Saturday morning meeting at a shopping center last January with her constituents, had returned for a last time to the House Chamber for the speech before resigning her seat to continue healing from her brain injury. As she entered, she was accorded a roaring round of bipartisan applause.

As characteristically happens at these speeches, Democrats stand and cheer for some things while Republicans sit in stony silence, and vice versa. A couple of years ago it got uncharacteristically rude, even for Congress, as a Republican congressman called out to something the President had said shouting, "Liar!" In this instance, however, Gabby's Arizona Republican colleague seated next to her was helping Gabby stand to her feet, extending his hands to help her up whenever she felt moved to stand and express her support for something the President said, something with which her colleague probably disagreed. But he reached out and

offered his hand to help. A small act, perhaps, but reflective of what I am talking about, the power of healing touch.

Our hands are a powerful extension of our brains. Aristotle long ago said the touch of the hand is the most fundamental of all the five senses. The hand with which we touch is an extension of the mind and the main instrument for effecting its determinations.¹ With one signal of the hand we can welcome and help and encourage a person. With yet a different signal of the hand we can shut off and reject and dismiss a person. There is power in the touch of the hand. I saw this dramatically expressed Friday night watching the guest conductor from Taiwan lead the Alabama Symphony making her intense arm and hand gestures as she magically brought the orchestra to harmonious life!

I

In the first of the 3 healing stories in Mark 5 physical touch is not actually involved, but nevertheless Jesus' presence is acknowledged and felt. Here is a deranged man, so utterly cut off from society that he lives out among the tombs, and often has to be restrained from his crazed behavior by chains and shackles. He sounds like what we today would describe as a schizophrenic person suffering from multiple personalities. In that day he was simply ostracized from everyone and everything, living as though already dead.

But as Jesus steps off the boat, this man comes out from the tombs to meet him, runs up and bows down before him. All these conflicting personalities within him recognize the presence of the divine. He begs, "Do not torment me," (for Jesus has already commanded the unclean spirit to come out of him.) This obviously is going to be no quick simple healing. Grasping the severity of the situation, Jesus utters the word the unclean spirits themselves suggest - commanding the evil spirits to flee from this man and enter into a nearby herd of pigs. They do, the man is healed, the pigs run off the edge of a cliff and drown in the sea. That is the one downside to the story, and it gets the attention of the keepers of the pigs who run off and tell everyone. And when everyone comes running out to see what has happened, the man is found sitting there, clothed and in his right mind, healed. All because Jesus notices him, listens to him, reaches out to him and heals him.

The man is so overcome with gratitude that he wants to go with Jesus and be with him like the disciples. Jesus, instead, says his witness is more needed among his own family and friends, from whom doubtless, he had been separated for some time. "Go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you." The man does, and in fact travels through the nearby towns of that Eastern part of Galilee telling all that Jesus has done for him.

II

Meanwhile, the second and the third healing stories take place as Jesus gets off the boat again on the other side of the Sea. Jairus, an important official in the local synagogue, in desperation pushes right up to Jesus, falling down at the feet of the wandering teacher and begging him, "My little girl is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she

may be made well and live.” Forget propriety. Forget decorum. Forget social convention. Forget squabbles the Jewish leaders are having about the validity of Jesus’ teachings and healings. A parent will rightly stop at nothing when their child’s life is in danger. So Jesus is going with him, a large crowd following along.

Suddenly, on the way, he is touched by a woman. I experienced something of this in Bihar, India, where in every place we visited large crowds gathered round us, hands outstretched touching us, some holding out sick children begging us to heal them. So every place, for as long as we could, we would lay hands on these people’s heads. We would touch them and pray. I have no doubt healing was occurring in ways beyond human rationality because there is power in healing touch.

In this case the woman who had been suffering from a bleeding disease for 12 years is in immense pain, and is convinced that if she can simply touch the hem of Jesus’ cloak she will be made well. She does and she is. Immediately, there’s that word again. Immediately, she is healed of her disease. Right then and there. At the same moment Jesus recognizes that healing power has swooshed out of him. “Who touched my clothes?” he asks. The disciples give each other that “there he goes again” look, and say, “Why everyone is touching you.” This is like being at Alabama or Auburn on game day.

But Jesus is referring to one particular touch different from all the rest. This woman, knowing what has happened to her, knowing healing has flowed instantly through her body, kneels before him, telling him the full truth. And Jesus says, “Daughter,” not woman but daughter, you who are part of my family, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” He speaks the word of what has already taken place because of her faith.

III

Meanwhile the mission on which he had been headed seems over. They bring him word that it is too late. Jairus’ little girl has died. Jesus responds by turning to the synagogue official and assuring him, “Do not fear, only believe.” He continues on to the little girl who has died, undeterred. Entering the place he takes only Peter, James and John inside the room where her body lay, and sends all the weeping mourners outside. Telling them she is only asleep, though she is truly dead and he knows it, he foreshadows his own mighty resurrection. Saying, “She is only asleep,” is a way of recognizing the relativity of death so far as he is concerned.

An amazing juxtaposition. One woman is healed immediately through her touch of faith, while another little girl dies due to Jesus’ delay. But there is more. Taking the dead girl by the hand, he lifts her back to life, saying, “Talitha cum,” - “Little girl, get up!” And the twelve year old child does that very thing. His touch brings healing, even before the presence of death.

What I am saying is this: there is healing power at work today when we touch in a way patterned after the touch of the Lord who united heaven and earth. He came to us, and did not sit in the temple up behind the curtain inside the Holy of Holies, awaiting the blood and smoke of people’s sacrificed sheep and goats to appease him. He came out among folk. He engaged with

them in places and in ways many would have deemed improper. He ate with sinners. He touched untouchables. He saw, he noticed, he touched, he healed.

Then his followers did the same. Peter and John in the Temple, shortly after Pentecost are encountered by a beggar looking for a handout. But Peter says, “‘I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.’ And taking the beggar by the right hand he raises him up; and immediately his feet and ankles are made strong. And the man jumps up, walking and leaping and praising God.”ⁱⁱ

When we reach out and touch another, we offer the healing of Jesus Christ. It does not have to be a dazzling miracle. It does not have to be a laying on of hands or holdy holdy hand during prayer. But as we reach out to many who feel alone and cut off by simply taking their hand and giving them a hug, this healing touch creates community and reminds all of us that we are not alone.

Take Jesus at his word and at his example. Reach out and touch him. Receive his healing touch. Reach out and touch his hurting ones. Extend your hand as an expression of your heart. As you pass the bread and the cup today to your neighbor, remember you are part of the sacrament as you offer healing grace, and say, “the body of Christ broken for you.” “The blood of Christ shed for you.” His nail-pierced hands – always his wounds are there – stretched out for you. Reach out and touch. You will be amazed at the power of your healing touch. You will be changed and you will bring change.

ⁱ Bryant Kirkland, “The Healing of Your Touch”, a sermon preached at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, NY.

ⁱⁱ Acts 3:1-8.