

THE POWER OF TOUCH

TEXT: Mark 5:21-43

Touching is a “touchy” subject. Over the years we have learned to teach our children and grand children about “good touch” and “bad touch”. We have taught ourselves to back away when someone comes too close – close enough to touch. Yet – when someone is hurt, or grieving, or just having a bad day, the touch of a caring friend, whether it is just holding your hand or it is a warm arm around your shoulder or it is a sincere, “I can’t hold you close enough” hug – can change the complexion of your day.

Jesus touched people. Jesus touched people in ways both spiritual and physical. You see it often in the gospels; Jesus reaching out with his hand to touch people. He touched Peter’s wife’s mother on the hand and took away her fever. He touched the eyes of two blind men and gave them sight. He touched the ears and the tongue of a deaf mute and gave him hearing and speech. He even touched a leper to make him clean. In today’s reading a woman, who had been bleeding for twelve years, had strong enough faith that she knew that if she could even touch the hem of his robe that she would be healed. And it happened. It happened as he was heading toward to the home of the ruler Jairus to provide the healing touch for his dying daughter.

Jesus’ ministry was touching people. He wasn’t a massage therapist. His hands must have been rough; the hands of the village carpenter. He wasn’t someone whose hands had been kept soft by ointment and salves. He shoved stones into place, absorbed splinters, he hewed timber, and gripped lumber with bare-fisted fingers. He labored under the blistering Middle Eastern sun. In an era without modern machinery, he raised houses, erected buildings, fashioned furniture, and repaired children’s toys. His hands must have developed a thick layer of protective hide that was obvious to those who shook his hand or felt his touch. But, oh, they were gentle hands. Never squeezing too hard, never touching too roughly, or over zealously slapping another’s back. But they were powerful hands. The trace of a single finger could restore sight to the blind, bring life to the dead, heal a leper’s skin, or lift a suffering soul from the dust of life.

Jesus was not afraid to touch others. Leprosy skin didn't repulse him, nor did he hesitate to handle the filthy feet of his disciples in the upper room. Now he wants us to use our hands to send the same message of love, humility, and acceptance.

Today's text reveals so much about the touch of Jesus. Here we have two different stories of healing and touch woven together into a single story. While Jesus is on his way to heal and restore life to Jairus' daughter, he heals a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years. Really, it's one of those a-funny-thing-happened-on-the-way-to-bringing-a-girl-back-to-life stories.

There is a lot of touching going on here, a lot of sheer physicality. Jairus falls at Jesus' feet. He begs Jesus to place his hands on his daughter. The people are swarming. A woman is bleeding. A woman touching a man's clothes in public; a woman who can sense things in her own body. Jesus can tell when power goes out of him. A crowd is pressing against Jesus. The woman falls down in front of Jesus.

There is simply something about touching and healing, and there is no getting around the touching and feeling and healing here in Mark. It's a sweaty, swarming crowd, and in the middle of this teeming crowd there are people bleeding, and others willing to fall in the dust or the muck at the feet of one man in that crowd.

As I am sitting at my desk writing these words I am not touching anyone. All I'm touching is my computer, and I guess the chair and the desk. When did I last touch somebody? Well, yes, yesterday evening a group of Hoquiam Pastors met together to talk about how we can help students in our schools begin the next school year equipped with the supplies they need. As I went into the room I saw Jeani Shofner, who has been undergoing treatment for cancer. Without any hesitation, I put my arm around her and held her tightly as I asked how she is doing. All she could answer was "alright", but I hope the physical touch made that "alright" just a little better.

Jesus had no second thoughts about touching and the healing that it can bring. As we look at our reading, at first glance, these two stories of healing couldn't be more different. The first major difference comes in the social standing and class differences of those to be healed.

In the case of Jairus' daughter, Jairus is the leader of a synagogue. This was a pretty prominent position for someone to have, and it would have meant that he was at least somewhat wealthy, and certainly had a lot of power and influence in his community. The un-named bleeding woman, on the other hand, wouldn't have had any power in the community whatsoever, mostly because of her gender. Women in those days were, for all practical purposes, at the bottom of the food chain. And, as if that isn't enough, Mark tells us that through her twelve-year chronic illness, she spent all her money on doctors, even though she only got worse. So after paying all her HMO copays she apparently didn't have any money left, but had been forced into poverty by her failing health.

The second difference has to do with how the healing comes about in the first place, and how these two people came into contact with Jesus. Jairus, the powerful synagogue leader, came to Jesus just as a mass of people were gathering around him. Jairus publicly begged Jesus to heal his daughter – to lay his hands on her so that she might be made well and live. With Jairus' role in the community, begging would not have been something that he would have been used to doing. In fact, he probably would have been more comfortable in the reverse situation: someone coming to him begging for mercy or charity. But, because of the desperation of the situation – his daughter at the point of death – he casts aside all pretenses.

The bleeding woman, on the other hand, never once asked to be healed. She too was pretty desperate to get better, as she'd going through all of her means to get better to no avail. But, instead of begging or asking Jesus for help and healing, she covertly, secretly, quietly, touched his clothes as he walked through the crowd. She reached out to touch Jesus, took the healing without even asking. In fact, Jesus didn't even know who touched him, or who he healed, until the woman confessed.

The third difference has to do with the condition of the two sick people. The woman had been sick – bleeding – for twelve years. This was a chronic condition that had devastated her life and fortune, and worsened through the years. Jairus' little girl had not been sick for twelve years. Her illness was apparently a sudden one, and one that had become severe very quickly.

The most striking difference in the stories is that Jairus' daughter died before Jesus got to her. Jesus arrived too late to heal her before death came upon her. When Jesus arrived at the house; when Jesus reached out to touch her and tell her to get up, he did not merely heal her per se; he raised her from the dead. This was a full-blown resuscitation. The woman never died, but was instantly healed of a chronic condition.

There are many contrasts between these two stories: rich/poor, powerful/powerless, asks for healing/takes healing without asking, twelve year old girl/woman with twelve year illness. But the similarity is pronounced: They are the stories of two people, who, when they came in contact with Jesus, were touched by Jesus, or found a way to touch Jesus, were transformed from death to life.

What is it about touch? There is no substitute for it. It comforts and reassures in ways that other gestures and words cannot. Touch can be like medicine to relieve stress, calm nerves and ease tension. Interestingly enough, it can do the same whether you are on the giving or receiving end. We are compelled to touch by the depth of our relationships. There are people we greet verbally, which is good and proper for many relationships. There are others to whom we may automatically extend a hand to clasp theirs. Thankfully, we also have those whom we are drawn to hug. Even beyond that, there are some we embrace longer than others and literally hold on to for the warmth and joy of that embrace.

Are our hands open, generous toward a needy person whom God brings across our path? At the beginning of Christ's ministry, we read in Luke: *When the sun was*

setting, all those who had any that were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them.

I can visualize Jesus' rough-hewn hands resting on a person in need. Oh, to be like Jesus. To have the same touch, the same grip on life, the same openhanded generosity, the same beautiful, beckoning hands, the same gentle healing touch. Look down at your hands right now. May God take them and use them for his glory! Amen.