

A HEALING TOUCH

(09/11/2022)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 5:21-43

“My daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.” (Mk 5:23)

“If I but touch the hem of his garment, I will be made well.” (Mk 5:28)

This morning we are continuing our reflections on the Gospel of Mark with a special focus on some of the healing miracles. We will attempt to discern what these healing miracles have in common (if, indeed, they have anything in common). We will attempt to identify what factors within us might open us up to Jesus’ healing touch, what makes us receptive to the healing powers that God has placed not only within our body, but also within our psyche, within our soul.

The two healing miracles that we heard described this morning have at least one thing in common: they both describe a healing power that is transmitted through the experience of touch.

Have you ever had someone touch you and it really felt good? I can think of times when someone simply put a hand on my arm or on my shoulder and I felt a surge of energy, of warmth, of caring. It just really felt good, unexpectedly good! There have been times when someone just gave me a hug (a real hug, not a virtual one), and it really felt good. During the Passing of the Peace, which is on hold for the present, we leave our self-assigned seats, we break our self-imposed isolation to greet, to shake hands with, to fist bump, or to hug each other. Because we are a friendly church, the Passing of the Peace at times seems to last longer than the sermon. I’m not saying it does; I’m just saying it *feels* that way at times!

Have you ever had that experience? I suspect that a touch takes on an exceptional dimension of meaning when we are feeling isolated or alone. During those times when we are in physical or emotional pain, especially if we are feeling overwhelmed by our pain or by our life situation, contact with another human being on not just a verbal level, the level of understanding, caring, and compassion, but also on a physical level can be comforting. I would go so far as to say that such a touch can be healing.

Touch breaks down, dissolves, or transcends the boundaries that we have set up around us. And we all have boundaries—those systems of defense that we have unconsciously constructed to prevent us from being hurt the way we were hurt in the past. Don’t get me wrong; these boundaries are very important to our personal identity, our sense of safety, and our sense of bodily integrity. But they also need to be dissolved at times, especially in a loving or caring way, especially in a relationship with someone we love and trust. If we are not able to dissolve them,

if we are not able to set them aside when the situation calls for it, we feel very isolated. There is strong and convincing evidence that the lack of physical touch can cause both physical and emotional disease.

Many people go for extended periods of time without being touched in a loving or caring manner by another person. This is certainly true of the many people in our day and age who live alone. They may talk to other people, but when does someone touch them? It can also happen within a family. Husbands and wives don't always touch each other in little affectionate ways. Parents need to hug their children more often than they do, even when their children are adults. I have had many people tell me that their first experience of a body massage, the experience of being touched in a caring and healing way by another person, helped them to reconnect with their body and even brought a sense of healing from times in the past when they were not touched in a good, in a loving way.

The passage of scripture that we heard or read this morning from the Gospel of Mark raises our consciousness about the healing power of not only Jesus' touch, but the healing power of our touch as well.

As you know, the Gospel of Mark was the first of the four gospels to be written. It is largely comprised of a collection of narratives that depict Jesus as being constantly active. As I mentioned some time ago, Mark records fewer words of Jesus than any of the other gospels. John, the last gospel to be written, contains the most.

Mark devotes a large portion of his gospel to a detailed account of some of Jesus' healings. I say "some" because there were probably many other healing miracles that were not recorded in any of the Gospels. The two healings that are described in this morning's lesson are alike, but they are also different. They have at least six aspects in common:

- 1. They begin with a need to be healed, restored, made whole, or made well.*
- 2. The people in need of healing reach out to God, whom they know is the source of all healing.*
- 3. The people reach out to God through Jesus, whom they recognize to be the Son of God or at least to be of God.*
- 4. They have faith; they believe Jesus can help them.*
- 5. Jesus responds to their need and their faith; he heals those who are afflicted.*
- 6. They are each healed by a touch.*

When the sick, the dis-ordered, the estranged approach Jesus in faith, something amazing happens! A power goes forth from Jesus: the power of life and health, the power of healing and

wholeness. Miracles occur when the faith of the seeker and the grace of God, incarnated and expressed in Jesus, come in contact with each other.

This makes me think of another of the anthems that were written by Michael Larson and Darlene Sanderson. It is entitled, “The Hand of God.” The lyrics came to Darlene after she learned that Beverly Lees had asked Sandy McKeen, who was going through a very difficult time, if she felt the hand of God as people prayed for her.

Today’s lesson begins with the story of Jairus. Jairus is a man of prominence. He is a ruler, a leader in the synagogue. However, despite all his success, all his social status, he is confronted with a problem that he can’t solve. His daughter, whom he loves, is gravely ill.

What is remarkable, and a little surprising, about Jairus is the depth of his faith in Jesus. There is no record of any interaction between Jairus and Jesus preceding this interaction; Jairus was not one of Jesus’ disciples or even the inner circle of his followers. Yet Jairus says to Jesus, “Come and lay your hands on my daughter, so that she may be made well, and live.” Jairus has no doubt that if Jesus wants this to happen, it will happen. Jairus has faith in the healing power of God transmitted through Jesus. Jesus, responding to this man’s great need, his great pain, his great love for his daughter, and his great faith, agrees to accompany Jairus to his house.

We should remember that, at last according to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus’ primary mission is not to heal those who are afflicted with physical or emotional diseases. This is not the focus of his ministry. His primary concern is to preach and teach about the kingdom of God. This is his calling. However, as Mark notes, when confronted with great suffering Jesus finds himself “moved with compassion.” He steps aside from his preaching and teaching ministry to heal.

I remember our discussion of this in our adult Bible study several years ago, when we were actually meeting in person, and we were reading the Gospel of Mark. It might be too strong a statement to say that Jesus was a reluctant healer, but it is apparent that he did not see himself primarily as a healer, nor was this how he wanted to be perceived by others. This may explain why he conducted so many of his healings in private, and why he told the person who had been healed not to tell anyone what had happened.

I think there are two explanations for Jesus’ reticence in the matter of healing. The first is that he didn’t want to draw attention away from his primary mission: to preach and teach the gospel concerning the kingdom of God. The second is that healing transforms only the person who is healed. It may impress the bystanders, but it does not change either the person healed or the bystanders inwardly. If I witness a healing miracle, I may go away amazed; it may even lead

me to take the healer's teachings more seriously, but it does not change me inwardly. Jesus' ministry is about the kind of inner transformation that will lead to our healing and then, as an expression of our having discovered the kingdom of God within, a healing of the world.

I think I came to this insight on my own. I don't think I read it anywhere. It might have come from a member of our Sunday morning Bible study group, but knowing the participants as I do, I consider this doubtful. I count it as one of my best insights. BTW, I was just kidding about the participants in our Bible study! They are intelligent, insightful people and we all contribute to the discussion of the scripture passage.

If either of these explanations is true, however, we are presented with a conundrum. If Jesus' primary calling was to teach us about the kingdom of God, and if Jesus really wanted to downplay the significance of his healings, why does Mark spend so much time describing the healings and so little time relating Jesus' teachings? Mark goes into detail in his description of Jesus' healings, including word-to-word conversations between Jesus and the people whom he healed; on the other hand, Mark tells us precious little about the specifics of what Jesus taught. For example, Mark tells us that Jesus taught his disciples and the crowds about the kingdom of God, but he doesn't tell us what Jesus said. As you know, I am not one to be critical, but I wish Mark had included more of the actual words of Jesus' teaching in his gospel. I also think it is possible that Mark missed the point.

Getting back to this morning's scripture, on the way to Jairus's house, Jesus encounters the woman. The woman has been bleeding for twelve years. The physicians give her a poor prognosis for recovery. In fact, "she suffered much under many physicians." I can think of some people I know who fit this description—two of them happen to live in Florida.

In contrast to Jairus, we note that the woman is nameless. She is without identity. Because she is a woman and because she is ritually impure, she lives on the fringes of community. Jairus is a man, a ruler, a leader, a person of status. However, like Jairus, the woman has faith. We don't know how she came to have such a deep faith, but she does. She says to herself: "If I but touch the hem of his garment, I shall be made well."

Like Zacchaeus who climbs a tree to see Jesus; like the blind beggar who cries out, "Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me!" the woman presses forward in the crowd. She gets close enough to Jesus to touch the hem of his robe. As she touches Jesus, as the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal meet, a miraculous healing occurs! The woman knows immediately that she has been healed!

Jesus feels the power go out from him. He knows something has happened. His disciples, however, are confused, even skeptical. In response to his question regarding who just touched him, they tell him many people in the crowd have touched him, bumped into him. But Jesus knows he has been touched in a special way. He has been touched with someone in great need and, in addition, someone of great faith.

When Jesus finally encounters the woman, he tells her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease.” Note that he does not tell her that her sins have been forgiven, to go and sin no more. Contrary to what some evangelists would have us believe, not all sickness or tragedy is caused by sin. Jesus addresses her in a remarkable way. He calls her “daughter.” This is beautiful! He invites her into a relationship of family, of kinship. She is no longer to be regarded as an outcast, one who is excluded and alienated from society and, by extension, also from God!

As Jesus concludes his encounter with the woman, he receives word that Jairus’s daughter has died. The messengers tell Jesus there is no point in his continuing his journey to Jairus’s house.

Jesus ignores the skeptics. He does not honor their skepticism with attention or comment. He does not become defensive about the time he spent with the woman, for some of his followers probably would have considered this encounter a waste of his precious time. He simply continues his journey.

When Jesus arrives at Jairus’s house, Jairus’s friends and family are weeping and wailing. Jesus chides them for their lack of faith. He says, “Why do you make tumult and weep? The child is not dead, but sleeping?” When he says this, Mark tells us they laughed at him.

They laughed at him! This is how people respond who have no faith--they laugh. They snicker knowingly. To them, what Jesus says seems ridiculous. And it is--to those who do not believe!

Jesus goes into the house with Peter, James, and John, his three closest disciples, and the girl’s father and mother. Jesus touches the little girl. He takes her by the hand and says to her, “*Talitha cumi*,” which means: “Little girl, I say to you, arise.” The little girl awakens, arises, and begins to walk. Those who witness this healing are overcome with amazement!

Going back to our original question regarding the factors that give rise to healing, the psychological or spiritual factors that strengthen the powers of healing within us, Mark suggests that the common thread between these two miracles is the relationship between faith and healing.

Bear in mind; it is not a hard and fast relationship, such that all who have faith are healed and those who do not have faith are not. The person's faith does not appear to be a major factor in several of the healings recorded in the gospels. In the case of Jairus's daughter, there is no evidence that her faith played a role in her healing. Nevertheless, I think we can safely say that there is a relationship between faith and healing.

The Greek word for healing, *sozo*, is the root of the two words: "salvation" and "wholeness." Health is more than an absence of illness. It is fullness of life! Our faith reaches out to touch Jesus. Our faith also invites Jesus to reach in and touch our hearts. When this happens, miracles occur!

I think we all know the healing that can come when the boundaries, the walls that we have set up around us are breached by a caring, compassionate touch. If this is true of human presence, of human touch, how much more is it true of Jesus' presence, of Jesus' touch! This may explain why so many of our hymns, including the two we are singing this morning, testify to the healing, transforming power of Jesus' touch.

We bring our own need for healing to this worship service, to this little community. As we join in the experience of worship, as we open our hearts in prayer, we do so in faith. We long for the depth of faith that was personified in and by the woman who thought to herself, "If I but touch the hem of his garment, I shall be healed." We long for the depth of faith that was personified in and by the father who said, "Come and lay your hands on my daughter, so that she may be made well, and live."

In our worship, in our prayer, and in our daily life, let us put aside the doubt and confusion that found expression in the remarks of the disciples. Let us put aside the skepticism articulated by the crowd at Jairus's house, by those who laughed at Jesus. Let us deepen our own faith, that we might experience the depth of faith that we find in Jairus and the woman, the belief, the faith that if we but touch Jesus, if we are touched by Jesus, we might experience his healing power! We, too, can be healed! This power which our Lord shares so freely is the power to make whole, to restore, and to give new life!

Let us open our hearts to his presence and to his healing touch.

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