

THE HEALING POWER OF TOUCH

(02/18/2024)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 5:21-43
Luke 8:40-56

“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.’” (Mk 5:22-23)

“She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped.” (Luke 8:44)

As indicated by the rough wooden cross on the lectern side of the chancel that was constructed several years ago by David Crane and is decorated every year by Darlene Sanderson, the purple stole I am wearing, and the purple paraments that adorn our lectern and pulpit, you might guess that today is the First Sunday in Lent. This is when we usually embark upon a Lenten series of Sunday morning reflections.

However, for just one more week, I would like us to remain with the theme that we began several weeks ago, the theme of healing as illustrated in the healing miracles that are described in the Bible. As you recall, we have attempted to discern what these healing miracles have in common (if, indeed, they have anything in common). We have attempted to identify the factors within us that enable us to open ourselves to Jesus’ healing power, that can make us receptive to the healing powers that God has placed not only within our body, but also within our psyche, within our soul. And we hope that our reflections encourage us to realize that we have a healing power within us, that in many ways, we can be healers.

The two healing miracles that we heard described this morning have 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! It felt warm and comforting! I felt touched. There have been times when someone gave me a hug (a real hug, not a virtual one), and the feeling went deeper than it does with perfunctory hugs.

During the Passing of the Peace, a part of our Sunday morning worship which has been on hold since the beginning of the pandemic and is still on hold for the present and the near future, we leave our self-assigned seats in the sanctuary; 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 often seemed to last longer than the sermon. I’m not saying it *did*; I’m just saying it *felt* that way at times!

BTW, as further evidence that our reputation as a friendly church, as a little church where everybody is somebody, our coffee hour downstairs following our worship service not only lasts longer than the sermon; it lasts longer than the entire worship service! In fact, it is not unusual for it to last *twice as long* as the entire worship service! Mind you, I'm not complaining. Just saying . . .

Touch takes on a deeper dimension of meaning when we feel 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 only the level of understanding, caring, and compassion coupled with a verbal expression of these feelings, but also on a physical level can be comforting. It can also be healing.

Touch breaks down, dissolves, or transcends the boundaries that we have set up around us. 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 the context of a relationship with someone we love and trust. If we are not able to dissolve these boundaries, walls, or defenses, if we are not able to set them aside when the situation or the depth of the relationship calls for it, we will feel isolated and alone. As we know, the absence of touch is a contributing factor in both physical and emotional disease.

Many of us go for extended periods of time without being touched in a loving or caring manner. This is true of people who live alone. They may talk to other people during the day, 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. Children, by the way, also need to hug their parents or grandparents! I have had many people tell me that their first experience of a full-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 parallel passages of scripture that we read this morning from the Gospels of Mark and Luke, which are basically the same but with slight differences, raise our consciousness about the healing power of Jesus' touch.

As we 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. 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 persons in need of healing reach out to God, whom they know is the source of all healing.*
- 3. They 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 them or brings them back to life.*
- 6. They are each healed by a touch.*

When the sick, the dis-ordered, the dis-eased 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 or relationship with each other.

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 little 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 one 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."

Actually, Jairus doesn't "ask" or "request" Jesus to come and heal his daughter; Luke tells us, "He fell at Jesus' feet and begged him to come to his house." Jairus has no doubt that if Jesus wants his daughter, his only child to be healed, 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 least 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.

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. This may explain why he conducted so many of his healings in private, and why he often 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, the good news concerning the kingdom of God. The second is that healing transforms only the body of 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.

If either or both of these explanations is an accurate depiction of Jesus’ attitude toward healing, 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. As you know, I don’t judge, but I 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 a 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.”

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 stops dead in his tracks! He 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 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. She is his child!

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 suffering 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 testify to the healing, transforming power of Jesus' touch. Bill Gaither, in 1993, wrote the anthem "He Touched Me and Made Me Whole." The words are as follows:

*He touched me, Oh He touched me,
And oh the joy that floods my soul!
Something happened and now I know,
He touched me and made me whole!*

Unfortunately, there just wasn't enough lead time for me to ask our choir to sing this as their anthem this morning. That's what happens when you come across a brilliant idea or illustration in the middle of the week.

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.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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