

"A Gentle Touch" - June 28, 2015

A Gentle Touch
Rev. Ruth Martz

Psalm 130, Mark 5:21-43
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Our gospel reading this morning is one of most beautiful stories of healing and new life, the intersection of the human and the divine in everyday life.

This is the kind of story that has the power to touch all of our lives. We can identify with a parent or grandparent distraught over a sick child, or anyone afraid that a loved one is dying; we can identify with an adult who is ill or dealing with physical limitations, trying all kinds of remedies; we can remember our own experiences as a young teenager, illnesses, accidents or challenges with which we and our friends may have struggled, and today, the young people who suffer from depression, anorexia, addiction.

We are also touched by this story because of the skillful way in which the author Mark tells it, as a story within a story. The fancy word for this literary device is intercalation, but I prefer the image of a sandwich. One slice of bread is the encounter between Jairus the father and Jesus; the other slice is Jesus' encounter with the crowd of mourners outside and with the young girl inside. The meat or cheese in between the slices is the healing of the woman with the flow of blood and her dialogue with Jesus. Each story enriches and sheds light on the other, through both similarities and contrasts---and a gentle touch, a touch of faith.

Jairus and the hemorrhaging woman come from opposite social positions. He is one of the leaders of the synagogue, well respected, and so he speaks to Jesus directly, whereas the woman approaches Jesus silently from behind. She is an outcast, an untouchable according to religious laws, invisible and unnamed. And yet both Jairus and the woman fall down at Jesus' feet, one begging for help on behalf of his sick daughter, the other in fear and awe of Jesus. Social status makes no difference when it comes to human suffering, prayer and confession. At some point or other we all fall humbly to our knees in despair and in faith. I certainly have.

The disciples and the crowd of mourners are connected by their negative, skeptical response to what Jesus says. *Who touched my clothes?* The disciples respond: *What a ridiculous thing to say when everybody in this crowd is touching you!* And later, the crowd of mourners: *Jairus, your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher further?* No, Jesus says, *the child is not dead, but sleeping. And they laughed at him.* Neither the disciple nor the mourners understand the power of touch, the touch of faith. When have you made skeptical comments like theirs?

Like Jairus and the woman with the flow of blood, there are similarities and contrasts between the woman and the young girl. The number 12 connects them, as well as the absence of their names. Both are very ill, their life force draining

away. The older woman boldly seeks healing for herself, but the young girl needs her father to bring Jesus to her. One touches Jesus and the other is touched by Jesus, holy words are spoken, and each receives the wondrous gift of health, wholeness and restoration to the community.

Faith, touch, and spoken words all rolled up into one amazing sandwich, I mean, story of new life as human suffering encounters the divine. A gentle touch that communicates faith and hope can ease fearfulness, soften hardheadedness and perhaps even transform hardheartedness.

In the beginning of this story, the first slice of bread, Jairus pleads repeatedly before Jesus: *Come and lay your hands on my daughter, so that she may be made well, and live.*” The Greek word often translated as “made well” or “healed,” literally means “saved.” Jairus desperately hopes that through Jesus’ holy touch, his daughter will be saved, in mind, body and soul. Jesus responds by walking with Jairus toward his house.

Within the Christian tradition, the laying on of hands is a sacred, powerful gesture that is usually accompanied by a prayer invoking the Spirit of God and asking for a blessing. We recently participated in the laying on of hands as part of the Confirmation ritual, with everyone connected by the touch of a hand as a prayer was spoken. It’s not magic, but rather a demonstration of faith in the presence and power of God actively working through us and between us.

The hemorrhaging woman also speaks first of touch: *If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well, literally, I will be saved.* It takes faith to ask God for help, healing or a blessing; it takes faith and courage to ask people to pray for you. It may take even more faith to believe that God’s Spirit can work through a holy touch. The meat, the heart of our sandwich story are the moments when **both the woman and Jesus** feel something changing within them, and they speak to one another.

You know that feeling when you’ve been really tense and worried about someone or something, and one day you get some good news, and you feel as though a huge weight has been lifted from your shoulders? Or you’re in the hospital, and finally one morning the doctor says “You’re going home today?” Or you’re grieving the death of someone you love, and one afternoon, a gentle touch on your shoulder, a beautiful song, or a baby being baptized awakens something in you, a buried spark, and you know that there will come a time when you will be restored to life?

When the woman touches Jesus, she immediately feels herself being healed, and Jesus feels power going out of him. He interrupts his walk for he must meet the person who touched him. How often do we have an agenda for our day that gets interrupted in some unexpected way, and we find that our attentiveness to the interruption can turn out to be as important, and sometimes even more important, than our original plans?

The woman fears that Jesus will be angry about her unclean touch, but it is this very touch that leads her to confess “the whole truth” about herself. Jesus’ response is filled with God’s grace, for he names this woman “daughter,” affirming her rightful place as a daughter of God and a daughter of this religious community. “Your faith has made you well,” Jesus says, not his clothes, not his words. Her faith has led to touch and connection, truth and blessing. “Go in peace and be healed of your disease.”

When have you dared to bare your soul before God or before another person whom you trust? The power of a gentle touch, the touch of faith!

For most of us, healing is not instantaneous but rather a process, and I suspect that this is true of the woman as well. After 12 years of being ill and alone, it will take time for her to adjust to her new life as a healthy and accepted part of her community.

Now comes the other slice of bread that will complete this sandwich story. In opposition to the mourners wailing and making a commotion in front of Jairus’ house, Jesus calmly tells him—and tells all of us when we feel uncertain: *Do not fear, only believe*. Then, in an intimate scene with the young girl, Jesus takes her hand, probably laying his other hand on her head or body. He gives her a command in Aramaic: *Talitha cum!* Little girl, get up! And immediately she gets up and starts to walk around.

We have sat by the bedside and held the hand of someone who was in critical condition or close to death. Many of us have witnessed healing that seemed impossible. We have also sat with someone who has just died. These are the holiest of moments. Yes, we are mortal, and we cannot heal all diseases. But the author Mark reveals the divine power working through Jesus and proclaims: “Hold on to your faith and hope, touch life in all its fullness because God is right with you, offering new life through Christ, on earth and in heaven.”

Time and time again, we rise up out of the muck of disappointment and the mire of loss. Haven’t you felt that holy compulsion to get up and get going again?

In the final, wonderful words of this sandwich story, Jesus tells the parents to give the girl something to eat. Food will play a part in the disciples’ encounters with the resurrected Jesus. The breaking of bread, the bread of life. The rhythm of everyday life is not only restored but also made new; everyone is amazed. Yes, there are miracles in our midst! Rev. Kate Huey asks: *What sort of miracle would it take for us to transform the world's systems, and the hearts of its people, so that all children in need can rise up to new life?*

The power of a gentle touch, the touch of faith. Let us cherish those times when each of us can say through the grace of God: *It is well with my soul*. Hallelujah!

Amen.