



“The Power of a Touch”

Rev. Dr. Michael L. Gregg

July 1, 2018

Mark 5:21-43

As the Associate Pastor of my previous church in Atlanta, I had the joy of doing the children’s sermon every week for almost ten years. On one of those Sundays, I took a bag with me to the front of the chancel and told the children that in this bag I had several different objects. These objects were things like a rock, a baseball, a balloon, and a pencil. I then asked several of the kids to close their eyes and put their hands in the bag. They each had to grab one of the objects and tell me what it was simply by the way that it felt in their hand, by touching it. For the most part, the kids could easily identify each object by the way it felt, its size, its shape, and its texture. Once every child had an opportunity to tell me what they felt, I continued with the point of the object lesson.

I told the kids that their sense of touch is really important. We can often tell what an object is based on what it feels like, when we reach out and take hold of it. I then said that there’s a very important story in the Bible about a woman who experienced the healing of Jesus and a daughter who was brought back to life, all through the power of a touch.

Our Gospel lesson today presents us with a couple of people who had reached the end of their ropes, two people who needed the power of a touch. One was a father whose daughter was dying and the other a woman whose life had been consumed and depleted by her hemorrhaging. And Mark uses a specific technique to tie these two stories together called intercalation. Or in simpler terms, sandwiching. This passage is what is referred to as a Markan Sandwich. The story of Jairus’s daughter are the two pieces of bread that surround the meat of the story, the encounter with the bleeding woman. We are supposed to feel the gravitas and significance of the story of Jairus’s daughter as this very public figure, this important and named religious leader, comes to Jesus asking for a healing for his daughter. Whereas, in the middle of the story is an unnamed woman who approaches Jesus in secret because of the socio-religious dynamics of the day. Two people, two totally different people, needed the power of a touch. And these two people received the power of Jesus’ touch by acting boldly and by coming as they were.

Often times we have to act boldly to receive a touch from the divine. This was true for the hemorrhaging woman. She was a bold woman, a bold woman who approached without a male presence in her life. This was a bold woman who pushed her way through the crowds despite her weakened state. This was a bold woman who wasn’t even important enough to have a name but left with the title of “daughter.” This was a bold woman who although was unclean, left that day with the feel of Jesus’ robe on her fingertips and the healing of Jesus’ power in her body. This was a bold woman. And because she had a condition which made her ritually impure, she was more than likely cut off from the religious places and from loving community and from financial stability. This bold woman could only do one thing. She had no choice but to act courageously.

Dynamic preacher and professor, Emerson Powery says, “She had ‘suffered a lot’ under the care of the medical practitioners. Attention from the professionals was usually reserved for elite persons. The ‘suffering’ remains ambiguous but may relate to length of time, severity of pain, or social scorn under the ‘care’ of the specialists. Other women, throughout history, have had to act in this manner to retain their human dignity. Phyllis Wheatley published her poems, under the scrutiny of Thomas Jefferson, Immanuel Kant, and numerous other (white) intellectuals of the day. Jarena Lee, the first ordained female minister, pursued her God-given call to preach. Mother Parks wouldn’t give up her seat.”

This hemorrhaging woman was bold enough to crawl on her hands and knees through the throngs of people, probably at their very feet so as to get through the crowd, only to reach out in faith to touch the very end of Jesus’ robe, the very edge of his garment that dragged the dust road. And when she did so, just as the blood and life was flowing from her weakened body, the power of Jesus flowed from his strong body, making a miracle happen.

And Jesus knew what had happened. It was one thing for Jesus to touch someone and heal them, it was something else for someone to touch him. And so, he shouted into the crowd, “Who touched me?” And although fear seized the woman, she boldly stood her ground and presented herself before Jesus. She could’ve run away with her healing intact. She didn’t have to return and reap the public shame at being caught by this male healer. But the truth flowed freely from her just as the blood had done before touching Jesus. And because of her boldness, she heard the words of Jesus, “Daughter, your faith, your boldness, has made you well.” We need to bring the power of touch boldly to the world.

Next, we need to come as we are for a touch. Some of us can’t admit our need for a healing touch because we’re too invested in having it all together, or at least in looking like we’ve got it all together. I know for me it’s pretty daunting, pretty frightening, and pretty unsettling to be vulnerable. We feel that we have to be perfect before we step into the church, or we have to put on a different face when we walk through these doors, or we have to give the appearance that we are important and respected. We want a powerful touch from Jesus but the divine can’t seem to break through our tough exteriors and armored hearts.

Each of the characters in this text came as they were to Jesus. They were vulnerable. They each had their own faults. They were each desperate. It isn’t the fact that Jairus was a member of a synagogue that’s important in this story. It’s that he was the leader of a synagogue. And as David Lose says, “leaders are trained to be competent, to get things done, to keep it all together. Until, that is, your little girl gets sick, really sick, maybe even sick unto death. I’ve got a twelve-year-old daughter, too, and I can’t imagine the desperate agony of watching her dwindle away, disappearing before my eyes in the grip of illness.”

And so Jairus threw himself at Jesus’ feet. He got down on his hands and knees and begged Jesus to come to his house and heal his daughter. Usually a religious leader would send an emissary to make this sort of request. But Jairus ran to Jesus himself and was desperate for his daughter to be made well. Jairus’s love for his daughter made him utterly vulnerable.

The hemorrhaging woman was nearly the exact opposite of Jairus. She was not a leader and had no social standing in the community. She also didn't have an advocate to implore this teacher on her behalf. And if all that wasn't enough, she was terribly ill and bleeding for over twelve years. And as we know, this woman was more than likely shunned from her community because her bleeding rendered her impure and unable to bear children. So, she, too, was desperate and braved the crowd seeking only to know the power of a touch, even the touch of his cloak. But she came as she was to the feet of Jesus. She came just as she was to the throne of grace. She came just as she was into the presence of the one who would also bleed and also suffer and also be shunned from his community so that we could experience healing and life. This unnamed and unclean woman came as she was. This powerful and respected religious leader came as he was. And we too, in whatever state we are in, need to come to Jesus just as we are.

And when we come to Jesus with boldness and just as we are, we find healing and wholeness in the power of a touch. Rick Morley, author and priest, says, "The contrasts between these two little stories are many: rich, poor; powerful, powerless; asks for healing, takes the healing without asking; twelve-year-old girl with an acute and sudden illness, and a twelve-year-old chronic illness in a grown woman; a girl who is touched by Jesus and raised from the dead, and a woman who touches Jesus who is healed while still very much alive. It's quite clear that these two stories are very, very different. And yet, at their core—and at their most profound level—they are the very same story. They are, in fact, the stories of two people, who, when they came in contact with Jesus, were transformed from death to life."

These are the same story, a story of the transition from death to life. The characters in our text today experienced wholeness, they experienced resurrection. And resurrection is obvious in the case of Jairus' daughter. She died. When Jesus arrived on the scene with the girl's sad and terrified father, the wailing and weeping mourners had already begun their traditional lamenting of the dead. But, undeterred and undismayed, Jesus went in to where the body of the little girl lay as if foreshadowing the women going into the tomb expecting to find the lifeless body of Jesus. But Jesus knew that wholeness would come to this household. Jesus reached out to her, and with the power of a touch, he took her dead, limp hand in his and commanded her to "get up." And she did. She was made whole.

And even in the second story we see how Jesus brought the ill woman from separation to wholeness. The bleeding woman had been dying for twelve years, and she had been unclean for twelve years, and she had been all alone for twelve years, and she had been ignored by doctors for twelve years, and she had been cast out of her community for twelve long years. She was far from healing and far from wholeness. She was so unclean that she couldn't even enter the holy place, the temple. She couldn't worship God. When the bleeding woman saw Jesus walking along the road with the crowd pressed up against him, and she squeezed her way through the people, reaching out to touch his cloak, she was indeed healed as the blood stopped flowing out of her. Her life was no longer being drained. She was made well and brought back into community. She experienced wholeness.

But sometimes, even when we are bold, even when we come as we are, and even when we seek wholeness, sometimes the chronic illness doesn't leave our bodies. Sometimes our children still die and the grief is immense. Sometimes we can't escape death, and pain, and hurt, and hate.

But, nevertheless, I do believe that there is power in a touch. Church, there is power in a touch. When we march in rallies, grip our signs, grab our neighbors' arms, there is power in a touch. When we sit next to our loved one in the hospital room as life support is taken away, holding the hands of the living and the deceased, there is power in a touch. When we go to North Dallas Shared Ministries or Hope Supply and organize and pack diapers for children in need, there is power in a touch. When we share nourishment and conversation with our Muslim friends at Ramadan, eating food and holding space, there is power in a touch. When we look into the eyes of the person sitting right next to us, eyes that are weary, lost, lonely, or afraid, we reach out our hands and our hearts, because there is power in a touch.

The story of the resurrection of a twelve-year-old girl and the healing of a woman with a chronic illness are joined together for a reason. These moments of touch are God's way of saying that the little daughter of Jairus who died is you and me. And the woman who had the very life draining out of her for twelve years, who was dying in body, in spirit, and to her community, is also you and me. The fact is, we are, all of us, left for dead. We are constantly being drained of life, lying limp to the powers of the world, simply biding our time like corpses waiting to be carried off. But there is power in a touch. It is the power of a touch that brings us from death into life. Are we people who have been touched by Jesus? Have we reached out and touched Jesus ourselves? If so, may we come as we are, take that boldness out into the world, and bring wholeness to all people through the power of a touch.

Amen.