

## Taking Jesus' Hand

Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, (Feb. 4) 2018

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When I was in high school my hometown First Baptist Church undertook a major renovation. The church sanctuary was completely redone from its early 1900's style to early 1970's style. The crowning touch was the bright, Kelly green shag carpet, which was very cool in 1973. What made that carpet interesting, other than taking your breath away when you first looked at it, was in that dry West Texas climate, that brand-new shag carpet was dangerous. To walk up and shake hands with someone resulted in tremendous static electricity. It could almost dislocate your finger when you touched someone, and cause small children to run off crying never to give a hug again. My elderly schoolteachers from the first and second grades would hesitate before giving me, one of their star students a hug. Indeed, that shag carpet caused everyone to think before touching. "Will this be worth it?" One became intentional before touching. No more casual touching. You thought about it before hand.

Touch is a powerful practice. In the Bible and Christian teaching personal and physical touch is powerful. It can bestow blessing and be conducive to healing and grace. Yet, it can also compel a curse upon a person and lead to destruction and diminishment in life. For good or for bad, touch is powerful.

Contemporary studies are tending to reinforce much of what we've learned from the Bible. Physical touch is about physicality but it is also spiritual, emotional, and mental. It is individual but it is also social, reconnecting us to

others and to community relationships. For example, there is more going on with sex than “just” the physicality of sex and pleasure. Sex is mental and emotional but it is also social and spiritual. This is why we have weddings. Weddings bring together the social and spiritual giving the community’s blessing and God’s blessing to a couple who are forming a new relationship and will have sex. Touch, and most especially sex, is weighted with much.

There are all kinds of remarkable studies on the healing power of touch. We have heard the stories of infants and toddlers deprived of touch and physical holding who have inhibited development. When touched, whether a child or an adult, the body releases neurological chemicals that promote health and well being, while at the same time inhibiting chemicals that cause stress.

Studies show, on the other hand, physical isolation inhibits our ability to accept our own bodies and some studies say we compensate by indulging our physical appetites by sexual promiscuity, eating disorders, and addictive behaviors.

At the same time, like all of God’s gifts, touching can be abused, twisted, and misused, resulting in further damage – physical or emotional or mental and certainly spiritual – which is another way of saying an abusive or misused touch is conducive to what the biblical world would consider cursing instead of blessing.

We are a physically touching congregation. We hug, we shake hands, we hold hands, we touch each other on the shoulder, we anoint with oil. And, as Barbara has said, we are learning about Healing Touch and healing hands. But we also emphasize and want to be very conscious of appropriate touch and aware of inappropriate touch. Not everyone is as comfortable with touch as others of us, so we are respectful of one another. We must pay attention to how we hug and where we place our hands. We want to do everything possible to make this a safe place.

Jesus shows us how to touch. And let there be no mistake, Jesus practices touch. Here in Mark 1 Jesus is touching and healing right and left. In the passage just preceding our reading this morning, Jesus is in Capernaum in the synagogue where he is confronted with a man with an “unclean spirit.” Jesus heals him. Directly, Jesus leaves the synagogue and goes to Simon Peter’s house.

I walked this very path about eight years ago. It’s about as far from the synagogue to the house as it is from here to the road out front. Jesus goes to the house of Simon Peter whose mother-in-law is sick in bed. Jesus goes into see her and takes her by the hand and heals her. From our perspective, in a kind of amusing way she immediately gets up and starts serving everyone.

Notice that Mark says that Jesus touched her; he took her hand and lifted her up. That’s explicit resurrection language – “lifted up.” Here was a person raised from the dead.

From the perspective of early Christians, this was the model of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus: we are touched, we are healed, we are raised from the dead, and in turn, we get up and serve others.

Then Mark tells us that evening at sundown, (in other words, after the Sabbath had concluded and it was permissible for people to travel further and do the work otherwise not permitted on the Sabbath) people brought all who were sick or possessed with demons. Everyone gathered outside the door and Mark says, “And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons.”

So here in short order, according to Mark, Jesus heals a possessed man in the synagogue, goes to Simon Peter’s house and touches and heals Peter’s mother-in-

law, and then spends the rest of the evening healing the sick and casting out demons.

Sounds like a full day. No wonder that early the next morning Jesus went out alone to a secluded place to pray and be with God.

Notice it seems that Jesus gets tired, too, spiritually, physically, emotionally... Jesus gives and gives, serves and serves, touches and heals until he is at the end of his rope. But Jesus knows what to do about it. He spends time with God.

A friend of mine who is a pastor has a new Bible study class started by a bunch of young adults. They talked about what to name their class. In the old days a class was often named after a person in the Bible: the Dorcas Class, the Lydia Class, or the Ruth Class, are common examples. A few years later we started naming them such things as the Seekers Class or Searchers Class. This group named their class: the Tired Parents' Class. You know what they mean. You've been there or you're there now.

Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah is one of the most beloved and most beautiful passages in the Bible. It was written to and about people who are at the end of their rope. Who are exhausted and in despair. "Have you not known and have you not heard?" the prophet asks twice (Is. 40:21,28). "The Lord is the everlasting God... He does not faint nor grow weary... He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless." He points out that even the most energetic and vital become tired, "even youths will faint and be weary; and the young will fall exhausted" (v. 30).

"But those who wait upon the Lord..."

Isaiah says that when we wait for the Lord, the Lord shall renew us. Sometimes we will mount up with wings like eagles and soar. Sometimes we'll run and not grow weary. And other times, we will simply be able to keep on walking and not faint.

I wonder if Simon Peter's mother had been waiting for the Lord. She was sick. Mark says she had a fever. She was in bed, sick, tired, and at the end of her rope.

The Lord shows up and touches her. And she responds by doing what she knows how to do – she gets up and serves.

Jesus did not touch everyone he healed. Sometimes he simply spoke – the power of the spoken word. But it seems he particularly touched if he could and especially if the healing involved breaking the isolation or exclusion of someone. Healing involves wholeness and wholeness means reincorporating into the community. Jesus touched, broke the isolation and lifted up so that we might be part of God's beloved community.

This morning we are invited to be open our hands in order to receive mercy, to receive grace, to receive the bread and cup. We are invited to take the hand of Jesus.

In 1932 the African-American composer Thomas Dorsey lost his wife while she was giving birth to their son and the next day he lost the infant son. In the midst of the deep grief, he wrote: *Precious Lord, take my hand Lead me on, let me stand I am tired, I am weak, I am worn Through the storm, through the night Lead me on, to the light, Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.*

This song became Martin Luther King's favorite song. He used to get Mahalia Jackson to sing at some of the mass rallies in churches. In fact, Dr. King's very last words, just before he was shot, while standing on the hotel balcony, he spoke to the musician who was going to play that night, "Ben, make sure you play 'Take my hand precious Lord' in the meeting tonight. Play it real pretty." Of course, Mahalia Jackson sang it at Dr. King's funeral.

What Martin Luther King had learned is what Thomas Dorsey learned, that like Simon Peter's mother-in-law, there are times when we are at the end of our ropes and we must reach out and take Jesus' hand.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.