

NHPC, Overland, MO—7/1/18 (communion)

“The Scandalous Touch”

TEXT: Mark 5: 21-43

The human touch is vital for human life. Even though we warn our children about “bad touching”— as well we should, but this is a subject for another time— let’s not forget that most human touching is good, and even vital, for human life. Think about the handshake, a pat on the head, a high five, a soothing hand on fevered skin. All positive examples of the importance of human touch.

The healing power of touch comes into sharp focus in today’s gospel lesson. This passage relates not one, but **two**, healings performed by Jesus.

Taken together, these two miracles form one story because Jesus was on his way to help the daughter of synagogue leader when he was interrupted and touched by women who had a hemorrhage. It was a miracle within a miracle, a double healing.

Let’s unpack this story to see what we can learn about healing, touching, and faith in God. First of all, both of the people healed were female: the unnamed daughter of a synagogue leader and an unnamed woman in the crowd.

The Bible does not record their names, almost as if they had no names. They were among the lowest and most despised members of the community. And yet, they were among the first to receive healing from Jesus.

Second, faith was a critical part of their healing, albeit in different ways. In the

first instance, the faith of the little girl’s father was a critical factor.

He had a dogged determination to make sure Jesus would come and touch her to make her well. Why? Because he had faith in Jesus as a man from God who could bring healing with his touch. However, before he and Jesus could arrive at his house, a woman elbowed her way through the crowd and touched the hem of Jesus’ robe. Immediately, she was healed and Jesus felt a force leave his body.

Jesus whirled around in the crowd and asked, “*Who touched me?*” We, the readers, aren’t really sure what will happen next. Was Jesus upset that someone had violated his space and stolen some of his “*mojo?*”

The woman was obviously scared: She fell down before Jesus “*in fear and trembling.*” the gospel tells us (v. 33.) She confessed: “*I am the one who touched you.*”

What would Jesus do next? Was he so angry that he might strike out at her? No! He praised her faith and told her she was healed.

Suddenly, our attention is turned to faith. The woman was not chastised for illicitly touching Jesus. Rather, she was praised for her faith in Jesus, a faith that gave her a dogged determination to seek out healing by touching Jesus.

In both cases, healing was accomplished by touching, although notice this important difference: The woman who

reached out to touch Jesus was healed immediately. (In fact, Jesus did not even touch her.) The young girl, who apparently was in a coma, was healed when Jesus touched her.

This distinction is important because it reveals that human touching itself is a vital part of healing, more important than who touch whom first. There is not one correct path to human healing, but human touch is the vital factor.

Here is another important point: The touch of healing is scandalous.

As I mentioned earlier, both who were healed were females at the lower end of human totem pole. Human history has a long tradition of not touching certain objects or persons, especially those infected with disease. These traditions continue into the modern world.

Most of us here are old enough to remember the AIDS scandal.

People were terrified of this unknown disease. At first people were so scared they might get sick, that did not even touch the victims, be in the same room, or breath the same air. When babies with AIDS were born in some countries, they were shuttered into desolate orphanages where human contact with them was severely limited; their human development was greatly stunted by the lack of human touch and nurture.

About 20 years ago, Shari visited Eastern Europe where she encountered another problem in orphanages.

She was part of a Medical Mission Team that visited orphanages set up in the Ukraine. One was run by the government; the other a church orphanage, a cooperative project of Hungarian Reformed Church and Dutch Reformed Church from Holland. The children there were abandoned by their parents because the families were too poor to take care of their them.

They were gypsies originally from India were they were the “untouchables,” the lowest caste. When they arrived in Europe looking for a better life, they soon discovered they were on the lowest rung of society and deeply despised once again.

Often, it was so bad that they could do nothing but abandon their newborns on the streets, in hospitals, and on the orphanages’ steps.

Shari reported that the state orphanage was the worst. The children slept in large wards with no privacy, the stench was overpowering, the children sat around listless without much touch or human contact..

The church orphanage was much better. The children had three balanced meals a day; the water was clean and safe to drink.

There was good medical care, including physical therapy for high rates of scoliosis. Each night there was story time before the children were tucked into bed.

There was hope! There was healing!

Healing was possible when generous Christians --like members a medical mission team-- were willing to go to a despised places on earth— an orphanage in Eastern Europe and break taboos and touch people who were once untouchable. They brought gifts, played and talked with children. It was the beginning of healing.

In recent weeks, we have witnessed a scandalous tragedy on our southern border. Young children— many still nursing babies— are being separated from their parents because the parents have been arrested. The children have been taken to detention centers; we know not where because our government will not tell.

Reports have surfaced that in one of these centers the children cannot be touched. No physical contact with adults is allowed. I have not heard an explanation of this policy.

It seems impractical and surely cruel when we know the importance of touch for young children. Thankfully, some members of the staff are breaking the rules.

Many of these children and their families are already being portrayed by some politicians as thugs, even less than human. If we fail to nurture, even touch, them as the human beings they are, we are planting the seeds for future conflicts and misunderstandings. I don't get it!

Is healing possible? Can we turn this situation around? Can we reach out and

touch children who live in desperate situations where our own government has placed them?

The healing of God brought to the world by Jesus provides us hope.

A bleeding woman and a young girl might have been despised by society and living in desperate places, but Jesus did not care! He touched them anyway! It was a scandalous touch, but it was the healing power of God. Can we do the same in our world? Healing is possible in this world when we seek it out with a dogged determination in places where the healing touch is taboo..

This is a central message of today's gospel lesson: With a strong faith, practice healing in places you don't want to go. Look for people who have the most troubles and are the most despised.

God does bring healing to the people who need it most. Oddly enough, sometimes they have the strongest faith! When we reach out to touch these people with our often weaker faith, we become agents of God's healing power and receive God's healing ourselves.

Let us pray.

"Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations for ever and ever."

AMEN.