



The Healing Power of Touch

Sermon Preached by Anne R. Ledbetter

Sunday, July 1, 2012

Scripture – Mark 5:21-43

Say this word after me, “Intercalation.” It is a new word for me, and probably for you. It’s the word biblical scholars use for our text this morning, where one story is inserted into another, so that two stories are told in one. Though the story occurs in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we will give Mark credit for this literary device, since his gospel is thought to be the earliest written. Essentially these two healing stories have been interwoven, so that they appear almost as mirror images. Both have supplicants – Jairus and the woman – falling before Jesus; both contain females in need of healing. The number twelve relates to both, hinging the females together – the woman has suffered a flow of blood for twelve years and the girl is twelve years old. Think about it: when the girl began growing and increasing in years, the woman began bleeding incessantly and literally losing her life. The bleeding woman has spent all her resources on doctors to no gain. She has been cut off from family and community, due to her condition, for you see, her flow of blood renders her unclean. The law required her to be separate, and not risk making anyone else unclean. And what about this number twelve? In Judaism one would immediately think of Israel, its twelve tribes. Mark is claiming that both females belong to the covenant community, and yet the life of each is slipping away.

In contrast to last Sunday’s scripture, the Sermon on the Mount comprising three chapters of Matthew, today’s two-for-one story contains the shortest sermon Jesus may have ever preached. When Jairus learns that his daughter has died and his friends suggest he bother the teacher no longer, Jesus says, “Do not fear, only believe.” Of course, this pithy exhortation is meant for our ears and hearts as well. Does not life present all of us times when we find ourselves up against things we cannot control, and situations which grasp us with fear? Our passage today calls attention to the mysterious power of faith: the woman who believes she need only touch the hem of Jesus’ garment in order to be made well, and the father who continues to take Jesus to his house even as he feared the worst, clinging to hope against hope.

Our story also affirms the inclusion of any we would exclude from the kingdom of heaven. The woman was unclean, and should not have touched Jesus or any man, much less been jostling with others in the crowd. According to Levitical law she could have been stoned to death for what she did. But instead of calling her “unclean,” Jesus names her “daughter,” a daughter of Abraham, a daughter of Yahweh, a daughter every bit as precious as Jairus’ beloved

little girl. Instead of admonishing her outrageous trespass, Jesus praises her faith. Instead of responding with justifiable anger, Jesus bids her go in peace.ⁱ Who are the outcasts in our society, those we would ban from our circles, from the church, or from this table? The gospel repeatedly reveals that no one is outside Jesus' realm of compassion and God's loving embrace.

Personally, I cannot hear this story without marveling over the remarkable power of touch. I suspect most of us take human contact for granted. In fact, some people – parents of young children say – may at times yearn to be left alone, with no one touching or tugging at them for say, a whole hour, or even an afternoon. But there are others, such as some elderly people, who live alone and rarely leave home, who may go a whole day or even week without human touch. And yet our bodies are made for touch, with our skin being our body's largest organ, comprising 18% of body weight, and covering 19 square feet of surface (more or less.) There are as many as five million touch receptors in our skin – 3,000 in a single fingertip! Touch is the first sense humans develop and the last to fade.ⁱⁱ

While our story emphasizes the amazing power of touch to heal, we cannot ignore its power to harm. Indeed, we are still reeling from the news story of Jerry Sandusky, retired defensive football coach at Penn State who was recently convicted on 45 counts of sexual abuse of children. Moreover, in the wake of the abuse of young boys by priests in the Catholic Church, our society has begun to realize that any church, school, scout troop or sports team is vulnerable to a would-be sexual predator. Statistics suggest that one out of three girls and one in four boys will be victims of molestation. Therefore, Westminster's session has adopted a very *intentional* child and youth protection policy requiring background checks on teachers, as well as training for volunteers on recognizing various forms of abuse in children or youth. Sadly, human touch can cause significant damage to the lives of individuals, yet its power to comfort, support, transform and heal is even greater.

Do you remember the story of Helen Keller? When Helen was a deaf mute child, imprisoned in darkness and void, her teacher Annie Sullivan broke through to Helen through touch. By putting Helen's hand under the water pump, and signing w-a-t-e-r over and over, Annie broke through to Helen, unlocking one of the brightest minds of the 20th century. Touch became Helen's lifeline to learning, communicating, understanding, and interacting with the world. It was the healing power of touch.

In her twenties, Sue Monk Kidd was as young nurse, inexperienced in suffering. One afternoon she witnessed the doctor's grim face as he entered the room of one of her patients. He said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Kelsey, you have cancer and we should operate right away." When the doctor left, Mr. Kelsey stared at the window in silence and Sue noticed he was trembling. She wanted to comfort him, but no words came. Instinctively she simply placed her hand on his shoulder while rummaging for something to say. With glistening eyes, the man looked up at her, placed one hand on hers, and whispered, "thank you." And Sue thought, "For what?" Could such a small gesture communicate so much? She will never forget that moment when she learned never to underestimate the remarkable power of touch. Indeed, it has healing power to console.ⁱⁱⁱ

Frederick Buechner writes, “Through simply touch, more directly than any other way, we can transmit to each other something of the power of the life we have inside us. It is no wonder that the laying on of hands has always been a traditional part of healing and ordination or that when Jesus was around, ‘all the crowd sought to touch him (Luke 6:19).’ It is no wonder that just the touch of another human being at a dark time can be enough to save the day.”^{iv}

Even in the healing arts, touch can be clinical or compassionate. Think of a doctor who during an exam feels the glands in your neck, or presses her thumb to your wrist to check your pulse. Sometimes it may feel cold and perfunctory. But some health professionals possess a caring and gentle touch. Consider Dr. Paul Farmer, whose story Tracy Kidder tells in his bestselling book *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. In medical school, Paul Farmer found his life’s calling: to cure infectious diseases and to bring lifesaving tools of modern medicine to those who need them most. A renown physician, teaching infectious disease at Harvard Medical School, running the hospital’s AIDS service, and seeing patients, Farmer goes regularly to his second home in Haiti. Across the mountains, in the rural town of Cangee Farmer founded Zanmi Lasante which in Creole means Partners in Health. Visiting Paul Farmer in Haiti, Kidder shadowed the doc in the clinic and on home visits. One day a young man named Ti Ofa, sat disconsolate, in rags, waiting his turn to see the doctor. Ti Ofa told the doctor, “I feel ashamed.” Farmer replied “Anybody can catch this. I told you that already.” Farmer could tell that the virus was about to begin its end stage and so he handed a large plastic bottle of protease inhibitors, telling Ti Ofa that he was starting him on a medicine which would take away his symptoms, and possibly let him live for many more years. Ti Ofa replied, “Just talking to you makes me feel better. Now I know I’ll sleep tonight. I don’t forget what you did for me Dokte Paul. When I was sick and no one would touch me, you used to sit on my bed with your hand on my head.” Ti Ofa not only testifies to the healing power of touch, but to the healing presence of Christ in Dr. Paul. “When I was sick you visited me, indeed you touched me.”^v

Mark’s intercalation, or intertwined stories, points to the central posture of the Christian life: Christ with his arms outstretched to touch the little girl, and the woman reaching out with all she has to touch even the hem of Christ’s cloak. Christ touching us, and us touching Christ.

We meet our Lord in the face of a stranger, in the embrace of a friend, in the beauty of a sunrise, in the still silence, and here at this table as we take and touch and taste the gifts of his grace. It is here that we are reminded that we are the body of Christ, sent forth in the strength of Christ’s presence to touch a hurting world – welcoming outcasts, comforting the mournful, healing the sick, companioning the lonely and fearful, embodying Christ’s love to all those who hunger and thirst for God.

ⁱ Michael L. Lindvall, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, (Louisville: WJK, 2009) p. 192.

ⁱⁱ *Life* magazine, August, 1997, pp. 53-62.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sue Monk Kidd, *Firstlight* (New York: GuidepostsBooks, 2006.) p. 78.

^{iv} Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*, (SanFrancisco: HarperBooks, 1993.) p. 119.

^v Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (New York: Random House, 2003) p. 30.
