

He Touched Me
Mark 1:29-39
February 4, 2018 – Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Our Gospel lesson today picks up where we left off last week. You might remember, Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, he performed an exorcism – casting a demon out of a man, and the observers commented: “What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.” Now today we read that *immediately* he left the synagogue, and entered the house of Simon and Andrew. Simon’s mother-in-law was sick with a fever, and *immediately* they told Jesus about her. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up and the fever left her – a healing story, a story about the power of touch.

As we move through the Gospel of Mark in this next year, I invite you to watch for signs of Jesus healing through touch. Jesus touches lepers, and the blind, and the near dead – and he heals them; and remember the hemorrhaging woman who pushed through the crowd to simply touch the hem of Jesus’ garment, and she was healed. Indeed, the Bible frequently links touch with healing.

I commented last week about how, in the person of Jesus, God came to earth, to walk with us, to teach us, to heal us. As I consider today’s lesson, I should add, God came to earth to touch us; and the power of touch is amazing. In this church and in many churches we practice what is sometimes called “the passing of the peace.” We set aside a time to greet each other, and to shake hands with each other. I will never forget – I was a lay person at the time and chair of my church’s worship committee when a lady told me, “Mark, I hope we never eliminate the passing of the peace from our service. You know I live alone and that’s the only time another person ever touches me.” I assured her that we would not eliminate that time; and I still feel very strongly about that. Of course, we need to be sure that all touch is both welcome and appropriate. We need to do our best not to spread disease needlessly; and we want to be sure not to make others feel uncomfortable. But, that having been said, we also need to recognize the power in touch. Sometimes a thousand words will not do as much as simply taking the hand of a person who is ill or who is struggling or who is lonely.

You may be aware, scientists and psychologists have conducted experiments on primates as well as on infant children who were deprived of touch at an early age, with the result of devastating effects on developmental and social skills. Indeed touch builds relationship, touch builds connection, touch reminds us that we are all members of the family of God. Touch is hugely powerful.

Still, some people are uncomfortable being touched; and to that I say, that all touch need not be physical. Without diminishing the power of physical touch, I note that, to borrow a phrase for Hallmark, we can “reach out and touch someone” by simply being present to them. It happens often that I will encourage someone to visit a parishioner who is shut-in or in the hospital; and they tell me, “I wouldn’t know what to say.” My response is always the same: “You don’t have to say anything; just be present.” We recently had a member in the hospital that some of you went to visit. I can’t tell you how grateful that person was for those visits. That person reiterated to me their thanks for being remembered, for people going out of their way to share, to share the love of God.

I sometimes find myself in conversation with what demographers call SBNR’s – Spiritual But Not Religious. That usually means a person believes in some form of higher power but does not participate in any organized religion. That being said, most SBNR’s can’t describe their

beliefs any further than what I just said. When I've tried to pin them down on exactly what it is they believe, I rarely can give a firm conviction about the role of God in the universe or the role of God in their life. But that doesn't bother me as much as their absence from community. Their absence from community breaks my heart; because I know the strength that exists in community, this community. I know the love that exists in this community. I know the healing power that exists in this community.

Are you aware that scientific experiments have proven that people suffering from severe illness actually do better when they are being prayed for; and they do better when they are being prayed for, even if they don't know they are being prayed for; but they do still better if they are aware that others are praying for them. That's the power of prayer; and prayer works.

Friends, in the midst of personal crises, nothing can have a greater healing affect that being surrounded by Christian love. Love heals. Touch heals, physical touch and spiritual touch.

Three weeks ago, I shared a prayer concern card left by one of our painters; and some of you made some donations that helped get the water turned back on and feed his family and pay some other back bills. But we gave Dave a lot more than money. We shared the love of God with Dave and that's huge.

The church is not just a community of friends. You can find a community of friends at a country club, a bowling league, a reading group, or an exercise class; and those are all very good activities. But the church is a place where we share the love of God and extend the love of God to others in a way that no other organization can.

Two weeks ago we passed out this booklet – “Our Faithful Journey” – it's the Long Range Plan for our church. I hope you're reading and reflecting on this. Consider our Guiding Principles: We provide opportunities for people to grow in their faith; we welcome and nurture a diverse congregation who becomes extended family; we foster lasting personal relationship. Friends only the church can do that. Only in the church can we reach out to touch the lives of our friends in truly amazing ways.

The scriptures tell us that Jesus took Peter's mother-in-law by the hand and lifted her up and she was healed. The power of touch, the power of nearness, the power of relationship. God knows our need for relationship, for nearness, for touch, so the Word became flesh and blood to walk with us, to teach us, to heal us, indeed to touch us; and God calls us to extend that nearness, that relationship, that touch to others. God calls us to be the hands and the feet, and maybe even in some small way, the heart of Jesus. God calls us to reach out and touch God's people with love and peace and caring, healing power.

And one of the ways we experience that touch, that closeness with Jesus and with each other is through this meal, this communion meal. So I invite you to join me at the table as we share together the sacrament of holy communion. Amen.

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