

The Power of Touch

June 27, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

Texts: Mark 5:21-43

About two weeks ago, I was given some amazing seats for the Red Sox-Astros game at Fenway Park. Julian and I went together with two dear friends. It was on the last night of his East Coast visit before heading back to California. He was pumped. I was pumped. Yes, it felt strange and a little scary at first, being there with tens of thousands of people, albeit outdoors. It also felt so good! The Sox tanked that night, lost the game 8-1, but it didn't matter. The most poignant part of the game happened off the field, when in the middle of the 8th inning, Fenway fans rose to sing Sweet Caroline. Granted, it wasn't the loudest or most raucous rendition I've heard. The stadium was only about $\frac{3}{4}$ full and people were still a little hesitant, easing their way into. Yet there we were, together, standing tall, whether belting or mouthing it out. I couldn't help but get choked up when we came to the line, for the first time since Covid mind you...hands, touching hands, reaching out, touching me, touching you! Julian's and my hands connected over our heads and it seemed like we didn't let go until the next time the chorus came around when we briefly, and I think for the first time in well over a year, touched and high-fived our friends! What a release! To feel that power, to imagine the potential for more, more hands touching hands, more reaching out ...after so many months without touch! It was 'so good, so good, so good!'

The theme of my reflection today is the power of touch. In case you missed it, our text is full of references to hands and touch. It's a healing story within a healing story, and Mark has clearly set them up to work together. On the one hand, if you will, we meet Jairus, a wealthy man, a "leader of the synagogue," we are told. Despite his privileged status, he is not above getting down on his knees, on behalf of his beloved daughter who we learn is "at the point of death." Jairus pleads "Come and lay hands on my daughter, touch her, so that "she may be made well, so that she may live." Jesus is on his way. Until he and we encounter, on the other hand, an unnamed woman who couldn't be more different from that consummate temple insider, Jairus! She hasn't been inside or near a temple in at least 12 years. She's impure, her embodied suffering and condition of relentless bleeding has deemed her unclean and so untouchable. She's poor, having spent her last shekel on physicians and prescriptions yet nothing has worked. Adding to it, she's forbidden from touching others lest she make them unclean. But she does it anyway, and with Jesus no less! She knows, somehow, she knows she can reach out and touch him! Her faith tells her that God's love never recoils, God's love is ever reaching, God's love is, as we just heard, more than anything which means God in Christ will always have time, always be present to us, regardless of who is on the triage list, regardless of who our daddy is or how much money he gave at shul last year! Jesus not only heals her here, though he gives her the credit for that, he does something else that too often gets lost amidst all the other action of this story: he listens to her story!

Back to poor Jairus for a moment. We have to imagine that must be freaking out right about now! If you've ever been with your kid at an ER or a hospital, it's excruciating, nothing or no one else matters, but therein lies one of the many profound lessons of this text! It's about trust! Jesus, and to some extent Jairus, trusts that when we are standing in the presence of God or of God's primary agents in the world, time and love and healing abound, all truth will come out, all injustice will be revealed, all will be made well! The hemorrhaging woman knew this as well. After she reached out and touched him, after he

asked who touched him, the text tells us, she came forward in fear and trembling and told him the whole truth! I want us to pause and stay with this line.

This wasn't fear of being chastised for breaking the rules. This isn't the cowering fear of the disciples in the boat from the last chapter. This woman just showed how bold, audacious and deeply faithful she was to touch Jesus in the first place! No, hers was a holy kind fear. This was "the fear of the Lord" we read in the Psalms, the fear and trembling of deeply humble and wondrous reverence! She's in complete awe of her proximity to this Holy Teacher, the source of her healing and of the world's transformation and salvation! She's not the least bit worried or anxious...she's just fully engrossed by his presence and his attentiveness to her.

As commentator Debbie Thomas has put it "Jesus knows that this daughter has spent twelve long years having other people impose their narratives on her. Their interpretations, their assumptions, their prejudices. He knows that she's been reduced to caricature. Shamed into silence by bad religion. Denied the spiritual nourishment and empowerment that is her birthright as a child of God. She needs someone to listen, to understand, and to bless her "whole truth" in the presence of the larger community." So, this is what Jesus does — even when time is of the essence, and he has essential work to do elsewhere. He pauses to restore a broken woman to fellowship, dignity, and humanity. He insists that her embodied experience is no less important than a synagogue leader's. ...he invites her to bear witness, to find her voice, to speak publicly and confidently about her story and God's. "Daughter," he says when she at last falls silent. "Daughter, go in peace."

Then and only then does the story pivot back to Jairus's daughter, who by this point is also unclean, a corpse, and yet he touches her, too. It's a story within a story held within Mark's gospel story of God's barrier breaking, death defying love!

This amazing passage is about a lot of things. It's about two daughters. It's about two people who push through a crowd, and through social and religious barriers, just to reach Jesus. It's about the overturning of the status quo and religious taboo. It's about the inclusion of an outsider, the decentering of an insider. It's about love over legalism, community over isolation, faith over doubt and disbelief. As I mentioned, it's about trusting in God's ever-present, un-recoiling love.

Yet what if there is an added message, and invitation, one that may be especially suited for us in this pandemic time! What if the invitation is simply this - to contemplate the power of touch, of hands touching hands, reaching out. Maybe it hasn't been twelve years for us, but it has been more well more than twelve months of social distancing, of being untouchable by most and unable to touch anyone but for perhaps our closest family or podded friends. What better a time to ask: what is it about closeness, physical presence, about human touch that is in itself healing and even reviving! And what does this kind of touch teach us about God's love?

James Baldwin once famously quipped of American culture, and of white folks in general "I think that the inability to love is the central problem, because that inability masks a certain terror, and that terror is the terror of being touched. And if you can't be touched, you can't be changed. And if you can't be changed, you can't be alive." Not unlike Jesus who took issue with the Levitical codes of his day, Baldwin was critical of the prohibitions and inhibitions around physical contact that arose out of American Puritanism that he said caused harm by instilling what he called "a fear of anybody touching anything." That kind of fear, he knew, leads to shame and repression which leads to violence against

anyone living on the margins! In a Fire Next Time, Baldwin expounds on the idea. He writes: “The word “sensual” is not intended to bring to mind quivering dusky maidens or priapic studs. I am referring to something much simpler and much less fanciful. To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread.”

Jesus knew this simple truth. As our passage makes clear, he was a sensual being, unafraid of touching and of being touched, deeply aware of the powers of human touch that could be used to heal or harm, especially when people were abused by touch or deprived by a lack of it! He and Baldwin both knew that touch was essential to being present and that being present was essential to God’s love! Jesus could see the harm that some of the Levitical codes, or their interpretations, were causing so he by his actions he overturned them and worked to disrupt the culture that upheld anything that might stand in the way of God’s presence and love, especially for those bodies most in need of tender caring and honoring - those who were marginalized, sick, suffering, disabled, dying or even dead.

Let’s face it! Touch has become an awkward subject for many of us, and all the more so in light of Covid! Many aren’t sure yet how we feel about touching! We’ve been trained for so long to avoid it we could also use some retraining! Neil Diamond himself tried to help last March when he reissued a version of Sweet Caroline on YouTube. As an act of public service, he sang it out: Hands touching Hands. Don’t touch me! I won’t touch you! Helpful guidance for a pandemic for sure but maybe not the kind of restriction or guidance we need for human thriving as we begin to anticipate coming out of one.

In his book *Consolations*, David Whyte has helpfully written “In the ancient world the touch of a God was seen as both a blessing and a violation - at one and the same time. Being alive in the world means being found by that world and sometimes touched to the core in ways we would rather not experience. Growing with our bodies, all of us find ourselves at one time violated or wounded by this world in difficult ways, and still we live and breathe in this touchable, sensual world, and through trauma, through grief, through recovery, we heal in order to be touched again, in the right way, as the physical consecration of a mutual, trusted invitation!”

Wow! That’s more like it. Touch, not as something to take for granted, nor to assume it's all good or all bad. Touch as a complex and wondrous part of being alive. Touch as the consecration of a mutual, trusted invitation. Touch as a sacred gift. Imagine over time replacing our current Covid related fears of touch, however rational they may be, with this kind of reverence and awe and appreciation about how inseparable bodily touch is from being truly present to one another! Imagine falling to our knees in gratitude for the gifts of human touch, properly understood, given and received with mutual trust and consent, absent whatever sexualized, racialized connotations that demean and objectify and make it awkward, fearful, shameful, harmful or even deadly. Imagine this time as a chance to reset our different individual and cultural understandings of touch to be healed and restored and returned to their God given natural setting - as a fundamental pathway of presence, as means to being fully alive and fully in touch with God’s love at all times, a love that is always ready to listen to the whole truth of one’s story!

Perhaps that’s the real rub of our passage! Jesus’s touch is a symbol of God's presence, the woman’s touch a symbol of our presence! Without touch, we cannot be fully present or alive to the world around us! Though we can’t reach for him in tangible ways that she could, we can choose to live our lives, in holy fear and radical amazement and trembling trust that God’s healing presence is always real and never

recoiling. We can choose to believe that, and from that belief, we too can reach out in care and love to our neighbors. Hands touching hands! Or, as Teresa of Avila has written:

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.*

May it be so, and may it be so good, so good, so good!

