

THE POWER OF TOUCH

7/1/18 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 8 (B): 2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

Can you imagine being in a crowd of people—a crowd gathered around someone very important—and then pushing and shoving your way to the front, knowing that you're really not even supposed to be in that crowd, but pushing your way up, anyway, just to touch that person? Not caring whether you have permission, not caring what anyone else thinks...just doing what you know you have to do?

That's what the hemorrhaging woman does in this morning's Gospel reading. Any narrative she had in her head about not being worthy of being in the presence of Jesus had to be completely turned off. Technically, she wasn't even considered worthy of being in public. She was a bleeding woman, after all, which, in that time and place, made her an unclean woman. She was supposed to be holed-up some place—away from everyone else. But she had had enough! Twelve years was just too long, and she no longer cared whether she was regarded "worthy" or not.

Every time I read this story, I am so fascinated by the details: how this woman believes so strongly in the healing power of Jesus that she only needs touch his cloak; how her touch is equally powerful in that he feels her hand on his clothing; how in that instant she goes from being an outcast to a beloved child of God. Instead of shame, she is filled with a certain moxie, and I respect that!

So when I think of the tenacity with which she sought God's gift of healing, I'm struck by the idea that many of us don't grab our own chance for God's grace and mercy, even when it's right in front of us! That we, unlike the hemorrhaging woman, don't even have to push and shove to reach the source of such healing, and, yet, there's something in us that decides—on some level—"I'm not worthy."

This isn't anything new. Moses didn't think he was worthy; Peter consistently questioned his call; the writings of some of the greatest theologians are evidence of them working out their own worthiness; and so it continues. I don't think most of us ask ourselves consciously whether we're worthy of God's love or not. But we contrast ourselves with images like the little girl in the Gospel story—so sweet and innocent—and decide we're not her; we don't need that kind of healing.

So here we have these two stories of healing—one sandwiched in the middle of the other. The first is the beloved child of Jairus. This daughter is so loved, that her father goes to find Jesus on her behalf; he begs that Jesus "Come and lay hands on her," because he understands the power of touch.

Then, before we reach the heart-warming conclusion of where this daughter is saved from the brink of death, we meet another female who understands the power of touch. The hemorrhaging woman apparently has no one to seek healing on her behalf, because, as I mentioned, her society dictated she not be in public, and, yet, there she is.

We can only assume that because she is considered unclean that she has been pushed to the very margins of society, in all kinds of ways, with no one to comfort her, no one to love her, no one to claim her as part of their family.

But not only does she receive the healing she came seeking, this previously untouchable woman gains the attention of Jesus. He, too, knows the power of touch, asking, "Who touched me?". And what I find remarkable, is that in his acknowledgement that she is worthy of healing, he restores her to the community, and labels her as one of God's beloved by calling her the name that was reserved for Jairus's little girl: "daughter".

"Daughter," Jesus says, "your faith has made you well." And then we're taken back to Jairus's daughter. Both of these females are given new life, and in the midst of all the commotion, when some are doubting the abilities of Jesus, he, once again, speaks calm into the storm, gently reminding them, "Do not fear, only believe."

What does that mean to you...believing in the power of touch? Touch can be a source of comfort, but we also know touch can be inappropriate and unwanted. Touch can be used to oppress, dominate, and distance people. This acknowledgement that touch can also be used to harm may explain our unwillingness to accept God's touch at times.

Opening oneself to touch, in general, requires vulnerability, because it might be a beneficial and welcomed touch, or the touch could be a horrible experience. When we find ourselves hesitating, in terms of allowing God's touch in our own lives, we have to remember that Jesus' promise to us is that God is our source and our center.

God's touch is always life giving, even though healing might not come in the form we expect or hope. God's touch is always available to all of us, even if we have to grasp it for our own. God's touch is always full of love, mercy and grace...if we allow it in.

The flip side of this is that, at times, there can be a sense of needing to be bold enough to grasp God's gift for oneself; being confident that we are worthy. And, in that place, because there's such a fine line between being confident and being arrogant, or between being greedy and accepting, we might look to the Apostle Paul for some guidance.

Paul's word for this type of confidence in 2nd Corinthians is eagerness. He writes, "If the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have." Now, he was talking about how the Corinthians ought to live in community, and how their abundance should be earmarked for the needs of others—in fact, that they should desire abundance so that they can fulfill the need of others.

But this line: "If the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have," seems to apply also to the eagerness of being willing to receive the gifts of love, grace and mercy, whether one is considered worthy or not.

So we are eager to accept God's gift of touch, and like the hemorrhaging woman, we no longer consider worthiness, we simply have the moxie to do whatever we can do to make space for God's love, mercy and grace to enter our lives. We are eager for God's loving touch, so we keep ourselves ever present to notice God's presence, and we actively seek out God's gifts.

We have a bunch of stuff scrambled in our head about being worthy. They include messages that have their roots in balancing the abundance and need mentioned in 2nd Corinthians. Will our need of God somehow limit God's ability to help someone else? And, then, we decide we mustn't bother God with this tiny little thing, closing off God's ability to bring new life to our lives.

This month's sermon series, called: "Is it all about me?", touches on the tension between our personal faith journey and the ways we are called to live our discipleship in community. Ignoring one side or the other is lopsided, so today, the focus is on you and your personal relationship with God.

Yes, we must be careful to share all that we have, to ensure there is enough for everyone—that our abundance meets the needs of others. But nowhere in Scripture, or in the teachings of Jesus are we told to be careful about how much we ask of God. Rather, story after story, teaching after teaching, reminds us of the limitlessness of God's love, the abundance of God's mercy, and the generosity of God's grace.

So it's perfect that the healing of the hemorrhaging woman is squeezed in there, in the middle of the healing of Jairus' daughter. Even though Jesus stopped to heal the woman with moxie enough to grab her opportunity to be touched, he still had plenty of power left to heal the little girl.

In the end, they are both beloved daughters. Which alerts us that God's loving touch is available to all of us, and there's plenty more, so we can tell others about it, as well as claim it as our own. So in these next moments of silence, until the Nicene Creed begins, I invite you to notice—as you take deep and gentle breaths in and out—to notice your expanding capacity to understand that you, too, are a beloved son or daughter of God. You too are worthy of God's love, mercy, and grace. "Do not fear, only believe."

-[SILENCE]

Collect of the Day:

Almighty God, you have built your Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone: Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their teaching, that we may be made a holy temple acceptable to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag. David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan. (He ordered that The Song of the Bow be taught to the people of Judah; it is written in the Book of Jashar.) He said: Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen! Tell it not in Gath, proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon; or the daughters of the Philistines will rejoice, the daughters of the uncircumcised will exult.

You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew or rain upon you, nor bounteous fields! For there the shield of the mighty was defiled, the shield of Saul, anointed with oil no more. From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan did not turn back, nor the sword of Saul return empty. Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.

O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you with crimson, in luxury, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel. How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!

Psalm 130

- 1 Out of the depths have I called to you, O LORD;
LORD, hear my voice; *
let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.
- 2 If you, LORD, were to note what is done amiss, *
O Lord, who could stand?
- 3 For there is forgiveness with you; *
therefore you shall be feared.
- 4 I wait for the LORD; my soul waits for him; *
in his word is my hope.
- 5 My soul waits for the LORD,
more than watchmen for the morning, *
more than watchmen for the morning.
- 6 O Israel, wait for the LORD, *
for with the LORD there is mercy;
- 7 With him there is plenteous redemption, *
and he shall redeem Israel from all their sins.

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

As you excel in everything-- in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you-- so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something-- now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has-- not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."

Mark 5:21-43

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." He went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." He allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. When he had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!" And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.