

TIME AFTER PENTECOST [Lectionary 13; Proper 8] (B) – June 30, 2024

Lamentations 3:22-33; Psalm 30 [2 Corinthians 8:7-15]; Mark 5:21-43
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Picture this: A celebrity – perhaps a popular sports figure – is making a public appearance. Members of the crowd jostle and push closer, hoping for a touch, an autograph, a selfie with this celebrated person. / It was just a week ago Friday [June 21st] that 23 duck boats full of Celtics celebrities and crew rolled through Boston, and an estimated 1 million+ fans lined the streets along the route, hoping to at least glimpse their favorite players who had led the Celtics to Banner 18 and the claim to the most championship titles in the league.

Or picture this: Pop music fans scream and nearly faint as they reach out to touch their performing idol. I imagine that *many* fans would have gone to great and crazy lengths for the chance to trade places with the Royals – Prince William, Prince George, and Princess Charlotte – to have *their* selfies taken with Taylor Swift on her recent tour stop in London.

Have you ever successfully taken a picture with, or gotten an autograph from, a person of note who's important to you? I still remember the night over 25 years ago when Bruce and I attended a Victor Borge concert together. We had prime seats on the stage at Symphony Hall in Boston. At the end of the program, when this funny and talented pianist was leaving the stage, I felt privileged to have him reach out and shake my hand on his way by!

Touch plays a major role in today's Gospel with its story within a story. The story of Jairus and his 12-year-old daughter bookends the story of an unnamed "woman who had been suffering from

hemorrhages for twelve years.” [Mark 5:25] The physical act of touching is important in both of these stories.

But: *What can we say about “touch”? And what does it mean “to touch”?* One of our dictionaries has no fewer than 32 definitions of “touch”! – including these three: “to put the hand, finger, or other part of the body on, so as to feel; to perceive by the sense of feeling.”; “to arouse an emotion in, especially one of sympathy, gratitude, etc.”; and “to be or come in contact.” [Webster’s Deluxe Unabridged Dictionary, 2nd Edition, Jean L. McKechnie, supervising editor, (Dorset & Baker, 1979 Simon & Schuster), pp. 1928-1929, defs 1.1; 1.26; 2.1]

What do you think of when you hear the word “touch”? What are your associations with touch? Are they mostly positive, negative, or a combination of both? Perhaps you remember when you were a child snuggling in someone’s lap as they read you a bedtime story, or perhaps you remember getting a big hug from a toddler so excited to share their newest discovery. Maybe someone held you when you needed a good cry after a breakup; or maybe you laid a cool hand on your child’s feverish brow to confirm that they were ill enough to stay home from school. On the other hand, your memories of touch may include traumatic instances due to physical or sexual abuse. Or, because of medical issues, it may hurt too much to have anyone touch you. If you are immuno-compromised, you may prefer virtual hugs or air hugs. And we must also remember those in solitary confinement who are often denied human interaction, let alone touch.

A recent article In *Psychology Today* noted that: “For both newborns and adults, touch interventions significantly improved physical and mental well-being.” These touch interventions were beneficial in reducing feelings of anxiety and depression as well as in relieving physical pain.” And, in case you were wondering, the

scientists involved in the study “also investigated whether touch interventions by robots were similarly effective to those by real people.” You may or may not be surprised to learn that: “It was found that robot massages have similar positive effects on *physical* well-being (e.g., pain relief) but were less effective for *mental* health.” [“The Healing Power of Touch: New Scientific Insights: A new study presents novel insights on the mental health benefits of touch.” Emphasis added. Posted April 14, 2024 | Reviewed by Jessica Schrader <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-asymmetric-brain/202404/the-healing-power-of-touch-new-scientific-insights#:~:text=For%20adults%2C%20touch%20interventions%20such,patients%20than%20in%20healthy%20volunteers.>, underlined emphasis added]

The unnamed woman in today’s Gospel is definitely in need of improvement in her physical well-being. But, because of her condition, I wonder if she could also have used support for her mental health. You see, she has “been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years”. [Mark 5:25, NRSV] “Hemorrhages for that long can indicate abnormal menstrual flow, possibly from a uterine fibroid. But in her time, with a focus on ritual purity, this woman has been, therefore, constantly unclean *and untouchable*. It doesn’t matter what’s going on inside, it’s what the outside world can see that is judged. According to the Holiness Code found in Leviticus:

If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her impurity, or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her impurity, all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness ... Every bed on which she lies during all the days of her discharge shall be treated as the bed of her impurity; and everything on which she sits shall be unclean ... Whoever touches these things shall be unclean, and shall wash his clothes,

and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening.

[Leviticus 15:25-27, NRSV]

The woman “may prepare meals and perform her household chores. The family, in turn, has to avoid lying in her bed, sitting in her chair, *or – even – touching her.*” [Wayne A. Meeks, General Editor, with the Society of Biblical Literature, *The HarperCollins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), note on 15:19-23, p. 175, emphasis added] /

This unnamed woman in today’s Gospel, then, initiated her own “touch intervention”. 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.’” [Mark 5:25, 27-28]

The *Greek* verb “to touch” – ‘*απτω* – is the verb that is always used to refer both to Jesus’ “touching” and Jesus’ being “touched”. This is no mere tap on the shoulder, no brief passing brush against another in a crowded space. No, this word “implies a touch [that] tends to hold and even sometimes to cling.” [George Arthur Buttrick, dictionary editor, *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, Volume 4:R-Z (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), “Touch”, p. 675] This woman with a flow of blood, which will not stop, took a good grip on Jesus’ garment. She did not let go right away, her grip real and restraining.

You see, this woman recognized that: “To touch is to tap into power.”

Having heard reports about Jesus, the woman in the story approaches Jesus on her own initiative. She may at one time have had money, but any that she had has at this point all been spent on useless physicians who have only made her condition worse. Perhaps these physicians didn’t want to get too close to her; perhaps they didn’t believe her; perhaps they told her it was just all in her

head – though if they'd paid any real attention to her at all, they could have noticed her bleeding and investigated further. It may have been out of desperation, it may have been with an attitude of “what do I have to lose?” But that day she approaches Jesus with the profound confidence of knowing that merely touching Jesus' garment will bring her the healing she has sought for so long.

So, no matter the large crowd surrounding and pressing in on Jesus (think 1 million+ Celtics fans here). The woman audaciously pushes her way through that crowd and touches Jesus' clothes – thus likely transferring her bloody impurity not only to any others in the crowd she touches, but also to Jesus' very self. But with that touch, she instantly knows she is healed; she can *feel it in her body*. And Jesus knows, too, that something has happened in Jesus' *own* body.

Then, something interesting happens. This once-bold and audacious woman suddenly comes “in fear and trembling”, and falls down before Jesus and tells “the whole truth.” [Mark 5:32]

Mary Ann Tolbert, in noting this sudden change in the woman's behavior, remarks:

[That] shift from audacity to timidity in her behavior begs for an explanation. Her earlier “shameful” boldness in approaching Jesus was acceptable from one who was already banished from honorable society, but with her healing she may be reinstated in the religious and social community. Consequently, her timorous deference reflects her renewed conventional status as a woman in the male world of honor and shame. [Without so much as a word,] Jesus [understands this and thus] confirms her reincorporation [into that society which has shunned her

for 12 long years] by providing her with what she [previously] lacked ... [and that is] kinship with a male: "*Daughter, [Jesus says,] your faith has made you well.*" (5:34)

[Mary Ann Tolbert, "Mark", pp. 263 – 274, In Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, editors, *The Women's Bible Commentary*, Westminster/John Knox Press © 1992, p. 268]

Interestingly, this powerful story of a woman healed is inserted between sections of the story of Jairus and Jairus' daughter. In Part I of that story, Jairus, one of the leaders of the synagogue, sees Jesus, then falls at Jesus' feet, and, on behalf of his deathly ill 12-year-old daughter, *begs* Jesus *repeatedly* to come and lay hands on her, so that she may live. We learn in Part II of the Jairus-and-his-daughter story that before Jesus could get to the home of Jairus, word came that the daughter had died. But they continued on their journey anyway until they arrived at Jairus' house. Jesus entered the house, sent outside the mourners who were making a commotion, and, with the parents, went to the place where the child was. Taking her by the hand, Jesus said to her, 'Talitha cum,' which means, 'Little girl, get up!'" [Mark 5:41]

Now, by touching Jesus, the unnamed bleeding and "unclean" woman risked causing Jesus to also become unclean. But here, at the bedside of Jairus' daughter (who is also unnamed) – here too, there is still risk of ceremonial uncleanness, for to touch a corpse would have rendered Jesus unclean for seven days. So perhaps, just perhaps, it was the unnamed woman's courage in reaching for Jesus that "strengthened Jesus in then reaching for the dead girl (9:25)."

[Thomas H. Troeger in *New Proclamation; Easter/Pentecost, Series A*, 1999 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 111-112] In the process, Jesus' holiness transforms

both of their uncleanness. Jesus also crosses the boundaries between life and death, between “clean” and “unclean”, to be with those unnamed, vulnerable, and on the margins.

Who are the marginalized members of our society today? Who are the untouchables among us? Whom do we touch? When have we been unwell, uncertain, lifeless, or excluded and in need of the touch of Jesus working through others? Or: When have we felt so frustrated, worried, or upset about issues facing us today that we wanted to grab on to Jesus’ cloak until the world is healed and set right again?

I am now completing my 37th year as Protestant Campus Minister at UMass Lowell. Some years ago, when I was working with students Rick and Kaitlyn at a worship planning meeting, I asked them, “Who are the vulnerable members of the UML community?” A variety of answers could all be given to this question, but Rick identified several examples of students who fit the category of “vulnerable”. The vulnerable, Rick said, are the financially poor – those students who might not be able to return the following semester due to a lack of funds; the vulnerable, Rick continued, are international students – away from their home and hungry for people with whom to share their faith and culture; the vulnerable, Rick said then, are the overwhelmed students – stressed by a difficult interlocking combination of homework, family situations, work pressures, losses of friends, and shifting expectations; and then Rick added, the marginalized are those whom one wants to actively *avoid* – those who never have a good word, who always complain, whose proverbial glass is half empty. // We talked, too, about how glib, easy responses to students in these vulnerable situations would not work, be helpful, or be appropriate. But yet we knew we are called to respond. We are called, as it were, to: “Reach out and touch somebody’s hand / Make this world a

better place if [we] can” – to call to mind the jingle that was at one time used by AT&T!

My beloved people, Jesus accepted the touch of an unnamed woman with a hemorrhage. Jesus reached out and took the daughter of the synagogue leader by the hand to raise her up to life. So in the words of a beloved Easter hymn: “When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain, / Your touch can call us back to life again, / Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been; / Love is come again like wheat arising green.” [John M. C. Crum, “Now the Green Blade Rises”, *LBW* #148:4]

For this aspect of life, the Christian tradition offers us a liberating, a comforting, and a consoling word as well: our true value is not dependent upon our relationships, our productivity, or our place in society – as much as lifestyle influencers and self-help gurus and grocery store checkout line magazines would have us believe. The paradox is that the One whose embrace joins us all into one great community is unable to touch us – unable to touch us because of hands pinned to the cross. The image of the cross, then, becomes an image of our ultimate aloneness, but, at the same time, of our deepest connection. “Gathered around the tree of the cross and standing beside a stream of baptismal water, we find that we can survive and even thrive when we face distress. For our roots are sunk deep in the Lord.” [*Sunday & Seasons: Worship Planning Guide – Year of Luke, Cycle C, 1997-1998* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997, p. 111]

Baptism offers us perhaps our initial experience of what one might call “liturgical touch”: A cross in oil is traced on our forehead as we are sealed with the Holy Spirit. At Josie’s recent confirmation on Pentecost, Pastor Carrie placed both her hands on Josie’s head while the confirmation prayer was said. And before the Eucharist in

just a bit, we will all be invited to continue to extend the touch of reconciliation as we share with each other a sign of Christ's peace.

So, in keeping in the vein of "liturgical touch", I share with you this poem by Ann Weems called "Touch in Church". But before I read the poem, I note that it was published in 1980, some decades before COVID. Especially during the early period of COVID, when people began to gather in person again, touch in church was discouraged. During the exchange of peace, the peace sign was made and waved around. (I note parenthetically that the peace sign still works in the sanctuary when congregants in the pews greet those of us in the balcony. And, of course, that sign works to greet those online as well!) Then elbow bumps became more common for a time, as the world began to reopen, and touch took on a new, more meaningful significance.

So, keeping that context in mind, here is "Touch in Church" by Ann Weems:

What is all this touching in church?
 It used to be a person could come to church and sit in the pew
 and not be bothered by all this friendliness
 and certainly not by touching.
 I used to come to church and leave untouched.
 Now I have to be nervous about what's expected of me.
 I have to worry about responding to the person sitting next to me.
 Oh, I wish it could be the way it used to be;
 I could just ask the person next to me: How are you?
 And the person could answer: Oh, just fine,
 And we'd both go home . . . strangers who have known each other
 for twenty years.
 But now the minister asks us to look at each other.
 I'm worried about that hurt look I saw in that woman's eyes.

Now I'm concerned,
 because when the minister asks us to pass the peace,
 The man next to me held my hand so tightly
 I wondered if he had been touched in years.
 Now I'm upset because the lady next to me cried and then apologized
 And said it was because I was so kind and that she needed
 A friend right now.
 Now I have to get involved.
 Now I have to suffer when this community suffers.
 Now I have to be more than a person coming to observe a service.
 That man last week told me I'd never know how much I'd touched his life.
 All I did was smile and tell him I understood what it was to be lonely.
 Lord, I'm not big enough to touch and be touched!
 The stretching scares me.
 What if I disappoint somebody?
 What if I'm too pushy?
 What if I cling too much?
 What if somebody ignores me?
 "Pass the peace."
 "The peace of God be with you." "And with you."
 And mean it.
 Lord, I can't resist meaning it!
 I'm touched by it, I'm enveloped by it!
 I find I do care about that person next to me!
 I find I **am** involved!
 And I'm scared.
 O Lord, be here beside me.
 You touch me, Lord, so that I can touch and be touched!
 So that I can care and be cared for!
 So that I can share my life with all those others that belong to you!
 All this touching in church -- Lord, it's changing me!

[Ann Weems in *Reaching for Rainbows*, 1980, Westminster Press, quoted in Brian P.
 Stoffregen Exegetical Notes at CrossMarks: Mark 5:21-43, Proper 8 - Year B, 3rd Sunday
 after Pentecost 2000]

Now may you feel held in the embrace of God's touch, today and each day forward! And then may that divine and healing embrace be touch extended through you to others.

Amen.