

These intertwined stories in Mark's Gospel have had me thinking about touch this week. The stories of a woman healed by touching Jesus' garment and a young girl raised at the touch of Jesus' hand open up rich areas of consideration about the roll that touch plays in Jesus' healing ministry. Those thoughts lead us to broader questions of how and why humans include and value physical, mental, and emotional contact in our social norms and expectations.

Such contemplation of "touch" is especially interesting at this particular moment in time, as we engage in the process of reopening spaces and activities that have been interrupted by a global pandemic that, without warning, deprived us of our usual opportunities for interaction. We have just experienced more than a year of severely restricted contact with one another and are now moving into greater and grower freedom of contact. That makes this an especially appropriate time to consider the parameters and possibilities of "touch"; what touch do we value? What touch do we seek? Which do we fear or resent?

Let me say clearly, before we go any further, that any conversation about touch must acknowledge that touch, when it is unwelcome, is far from a blessing. Over the course of the last few years, we have developed a greater -- and long overdue -- public acknowledgement of the traumatic and destructive nature of imposed or oppressive touch. The "Me, Too" movement which arose from revelations about powerful figures who routinely engaged in harassment or assault has provided a forum for discussions of power dynamics and personal boundaries. There is, at long last, a broad conversation about the ways that outmoded gender and sexual social mores allowed some people to regularly cause others discomfort or even trauma.

Even in contexts that have not been deeply impacted by such difficult issues, the practices and expectations around touch can be a --well, a touchy subject. For instance, in a congregation that Passes the Peace with enthusiasm, there is that awkward moment as people who don't know each other well approach one another, each trying to figure out whether the other is a hugger or a handshaker or a waver from a few feet away. And now, we add to that the coming-out-of-pandemic need to assess who is ready to share a hug or handshake and who prefers to limit contact to a fist or elbow bump.

Yes, experiences and questions of touch can be challenging to navigate. That is true and worthy of our attention. But this morning, with our stories from Mark as a guide, I'd like to look at the life-affirming, life-giving possibilities of human touch when we reach toward one another with hope, confidence, and love.

We find the same healing stories of Jairus' daughter and an unnamed woman with an incessant bleeding disorder in Matthew and Luke's gospels as well as in Mark's. But it is interesting that

Mark -- uncharacteristically -- tells the most detailed version of these intertwined stories. This is another instance where Mark fits one story within another so that the two can interpret and amplify each other. Some of the details reflect similarity between the two situations: the woman has been suffering from her malady for twelve years; Jairus' daughter is twelve years old. Both Jairus and the woman fall at Jesus' feet: Jairus to beg for his help and the woman to confess her bold pursuit of healing when Jesus demands to know who had touched him. In his commentary on this passage, N. T. Wright points out that "both stories are about fear and faith, and the power of Jesus to take people from one to the other." Other particulars in these tales of healing bounce off each other: Jairus is identified by name and by his position of some standing in the community; he is a leader of the synagogue; he has a family and apparently enough wealth to engage professional mourners. The woman gets no name and no indication of connection; the string of participles with which Mark describes her -- he writes of her having suffered for twelve years; having enduring much from physicians; having spent all her money; having gotten worse; having heard about Jesus -- suggest that she is without further resources of support or money. Jairus openly beseeches Jesus to come and heal his daughter with the touch of his hands. The woman approaches furtively in the jostling crowd and surreptitiously touches Jesus' cloak, hoping to receive healing without drawing any notice.

Jesus, of course, does notice. He perceives the healing flow of power leaving his body just as the woman perceives the ending of the relentless blood flow that has dominated her life for so long. (D. Mark Davis; *Left Behind and Loving It* blog post).

Jesus stops, turns around, and asks who has touched him. That might seem a ridiculous question given that he is in the midst of a surging crowd. Indeed, the disciples find it a ridiculous question, but the woman hears him ask and comes forward, knowing that she is exposing herself to the crowd's anger when they realize that they have inadvertently come into contact with a body whose disease has rendered it religiously impure.

She has disobeyed Jewish law by touching a man while she is bleeding. Nevertheless, she comes forward, falls at Jesus' feet and tells him, as Mark puts it, "the whole truth". Jesus, rather than chastising her, calls her "Daughter", thereby validating her act of reaching out for his healing power and openly declaring solidarity and relationship with her. He confirms her healing, saying *Your faith has made you well*; that being made well extends beyond bodily health; "in the context of the narrative, it suggests a sense of well-being and restoration." (Skinner, *Connections*, p. 123)

Meanwhile, her recitation of "the whole truth" has lasted long enough that messengers come from Jairus' house to inform him that his daughter has died. Jairus had come to Jesus with an urgent plea and had made it plain that time was of the essence. Yet Jesus takes the time to hear the woman's story and now "Jairus' worst nightmare seems to come true -- they waited too long and now it is too late." By dealing with the woman, Jesus seems to have missed the chance

to heal the young girl. But, as commentator Matt Skinner writes: “Jesus makes it clear that this is no zero-sum game in which only one woman can receive a blessing from him. Both stories will end in healing.”

Jesus proceeds to Jairus’ house where he takes the daughter’s hand and lifts her from her sickbed to restored health.

Again, as with the woman, touch provides healing power.

These stories -- especially the interior story of the woman with a bleeding disorder -- are often considered from the perspective of ritual purity and defilement. But Matt Skinner points out that “No one, not even the Gospel’s narrator, shows concern that the woman touches Jesus and that he willingly takes the hand of the recently deceased daughter.... Instead, these are two stories about Jesus extending wholeness and blessing to individuals who would have been considered by others to have moved out of reach of such things -- past the possibility of restoration and health.” (*Connections*, p. 124)

These stories remind us that the reach of God’s grace is long and that God’s will for humanity and creation to flourish is broad and strong; God’s intention for us to live whole, full, joyous lives is revealed by Jesus in these and other acts of compassionate healing of bodies, minds, and spirits.

The past sixteen months have been an extended pandemic season which we hope is nearing the end of this first acute stage and not gearing up to wallop us again with new variants and unexpected resurgences. Over these months, we have been confronted with stark reminders that human bodies are vulnerable to danger, susceptible to disease, fragile and finite. We have been reminded, by the loss of such interactions, that it is precious indeed to join hands and share hugs as expressions of affection and encouragement. One of the worst consequences of the pandemic, especially early on, was the necessity to restrict contact so thoroughly that family members could not visit hospitalized loved ones; dying people and grieving people alike were denied the chance to experience the power of touch to comfort in moments of sorrow or fear. I am not criticizing those medical measures, which were appropriate for the circumstances. I am saying that I think many of us have learned over the past year and a half just how much we took hugs for granted before Covid-19 deprived us of them. I hope one of the lessons we carry into the future is a renewed attentiveness to the place and purpose and value and power of human touch.

I have had my grandchildren with me for the past several days, and have delighted in the way the three of us have gone right back to our old habits of squishing in close on the sofa to read a book together and of holding hands as we cross a parking lot. Even though my live-alone, half-hermit self did pretty well with pandemic isolation, this week has reminded me that it is lovely

and energizing to be close to other beloved bodies. I hope that you, too, have had experiences of reconnection and renewal.

Mark tells two intertwined stories of the healing power of touch to restore what is broken and to reclaim what is lost. May we, like the woman and girl who encountered Jesus, find new life through the precious gift of human connection.

Amen.