

“Touched”

Mark 5: 21-43

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost/B, July 1, 2012

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How many of you have heard the expression “the frozen chosen?” Did you know when people say this they are talking about you? Take a moment to consider if this stereotype describes your religious experience in any way. People think the frozen chosen lack empathy, we are thinkers not feelers. We intellectualize our way into faith instead of feeling our way into faith. The ritual of passing the peace has become the battle ground for the frozen chosen. In many churches this ritual of hospitality has become nearly extinct because frankly it makes us too uncomfortable. People say the practice is too “Catholic”, but in reality, the aversion has more to do with the lack of control inherent in it and the fact that in order to pass the peace you might have to touch someone.

I love the poetry of Ann Weems. She writes “churchy” poetry. I came across a poem she wrote many years ago entitled “Touch in Church.”

Within the proper parameters, church is where we ought to feel comfortable touching and being touched. This is the place where we anticipate being touched by the Holy. Ann Weems invites us to move beyond our fear to let others into our personal, spiritual space. She writes,

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

We would prefer to remain the frozen chosen, "thank you very much", than do something as simple as touch the person next to us. Touching *is* a radical concept for some people. It is hard to imagine the healing power in a simple touch until you are desperately in need of it. Today's gospel story explores the many aspects of touching. It is about new life and cheating death, about taking control and daring to get what you need, and advocating on behalf of one who has no power and no voice. Strangely enough, this story of the women suffering with a bleeding illness for twelve years and the twelve year old daughter that is brought back to life is one of my favorite gospel stories.

First the hemorrhaging woman takes healing into her own hands, by pushing through the crowd to get closer to Jesus. Then, without asking permission, she reaches out to touch Jesus' cloak. Immediately he feels energy leave his body and enter another. Not knowing who has touched him, he seeks to confront the one who has been so courageous. The woman falls at his feet and tells him the whole truth. We do not know exactly what she said or how long the conversation was between them. We only know Jesus says, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

This story is an interruption, a story within a story. Jairus has already pleaded with Jesus to come to his home to minister to his twelve year old daughter who is gravely ill. He crosses religious and political boundaries to seek Jesus' help. Neglecting to seek Jesus' help would be like turning down an opportunity to receive the latest and greatest treatment at the Mayo Clinic? This is a father who sets aside all other concerns for his child.

On the way to Jairus' house, Jesus is interrupted by the hemorrhaging woman. You may have heard the saying "life is what happens when you are making other plans." What happens in our lives is often out of our control. It is how we receive these interruptions that matters. Do we go easily with the flow? Are we able to shift gears, to give the person who is right before us the attention and respect they deserve?

Jairus seems to handle this interruption with grace. However, when they are ready to proceed to his home, they receive bad news. People tell Jesus that Jairus' daughter has died. Don't bother coming because now it is too late. Jesus knows the truth. She is not dead. Come, have a little faith. Lean on the faith that brought you to me in the first place, he seems to tell Jairus.

Jesus promises the child is only sleeping and will be just fine. He touches her and orders her to get up. Without much fanfare, she walks around and gets something to eat. The whole scene is remarkably unremarkable. In order to receive the healing we need, we must take some initiative, on behalf of oneself or someone we love. In order to follow Jesus, we must be willing to get dirty, to do the little things that will eventually bring us to health and wholeness. You can not sit idly by hoping this religious thing will miraculously change you or you can acknowledge your wounds, seek your own healing, and allow yourself to be touched. When we wonder if life will ever get better, Jesus says, do not fear, only believe.

Many of the students on the mission trip to Providence learned powerful lessons about touching. A team went to a day care center every day. They spent the morning with little children in their laps, playing games or reading stories. When the week was over one tough little girl said, "We were just starting to be friends." You could hear the disappointment in her voice. We had all been touched.

Many groups made their way to the Providence Rescue Mission where we met Carlos. Carlos ran the kitchen. He had been through the mission's program and was now the man in charge. We were blessed to be greeted each morning by his infectious smile. Within a day or two Carlos was showing us pictures of his children and telling us stories of them. On Thursday, our group surprised Carlos with a birthday cake at lunch. He was so touched, he could not speak. His tears told the story. We had all been touched.

We spent many hours at the Hamilton House which was next door to Central Congregational Church where we stayed. Anna and Jess were thankful for the young people who cleaned rooms that had been neglected or pulled weeds in the yard. Retired folks come to Hamilton House for language classes or to socialize with friends. This is where they find community, where they keep from feeling isolated. Jess surprised our group with an amazing cake for dessert on Thursday night to say thank you for all the work we had done. We had all been touched.

Tuesday night we made new friends. Carlton, Frank, Francisco and Nick came to share with us what it was like to be homeless. They were members of the Rhodes Island Coalition for the Homeless speaker's bureau. We shared stories at the dinner table and

then ate our evening meal together. The next day the Rhodes Island legislature was signing the "Homeless Bill of Rights." They invited us to join them at the Capitol. One group was able to be there. They stood with their new friends and together signed this landmark legislation. We had all been touched.

We always learn a lot when we work with young people. They have no problem touching. By the end of a mission trip, we can hardly pry them apart (and there is a lot of hugging on the part of the adults as well.) They hug freely, hold hands without concern and show each other a level of compassion that astounds me. I have watched our young people mature beyond the stage of awkwardly excluding others to embracing everyone who come into the circle. They get it. They don't need to have words to describe it. They just get it. Friends, there is hope for the frozen chosen. Just watch how the youth do it. We are all touched when we risk reaching out in the name of Christ. May it be our mission to touch and be touched! Amen