

A Healing Touch

Mark 5: 21-43

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 2nd July 2006/ Sacrament of Holy Communion

Two people in need of healing. A poor, nameless woman, ashamed of her condition, hides lost in the crowd of other nameless people following Jesus. The other one is a young woman, twelve years old, although nameless, she has a wealthy father, a respectable father, a father who has influence and power, a leader of the synagogue and probably viewed by some a little closer to God. The older woman has been hemorrhaging for twelve years. She has endured much, suffered greatly under physicians who took her money but left her without a cure and now worse. She has no advocate, no one to defend her. She's on her own. Alone. Alone and ritually unclean, which means she's forced to be completely isolated from the community, set apart. Everything she touches become unclean, impure and defiled. She's at the end, the point of desperation.

The young woman is at the point of death too, from any number of diseases that took the life of young people in the first century. But she probably had the best possible health-care available. She has her father advocate who seeks out Jesus. She's part of a family, a wider community, and suffering from something which, though apparently terminal, doesn't leave her unclean and ritually impure. Although, once she dies, according to Jewish Law, all those who tend to her will be unclean for a while until they take the necessary steps to purify themselves.

Two healings. Actually, healing within a healing, both involving a *risk-taking touch*. News of Jesus' gift for healing was apparently spreading throughout the region, for he had just arrived from across the sea when Jairus, the synagogue leader, approached him, fell at his feet and begged him to come and "lay his hands on her that she made be made well, and live." A large crowd gathers around him as he rushes to Jairus' home. That's when the woman hemorrhaging for twelve years, the desperate one, the nameless, status-less, shamed, and unclean one, who has nothing left to lose, yet risking so much reaches out to touch Jesus' cloak. As soon as she touched it, she was "healed," the text says; Jesus felt his power go forth from him.

Then Jesus turns and seeks her out. "Who touched me?" He looked all around to see who touched him. His disciples respond with a hint of sarcasm, discounting his comment, "*You see the crowd pressing in on you, don't you? Then why are you asking who touched you? Who hasn't touched you?*" He ignored them and continued looking when

she returned on her own, knowing something happened, but also fearful and trembling. Because you see, when she in bold-faith reached out to touch Jesus, she made him ritually unclean as well. But that's not why Jesus went looking for her; something far more important motivates him, as we'll see in a minute.

Jesus and the older woman were interrupted by death. Jairus' daughter has died. Some said, "Then don't bother the teacher any further" Jesus overhears this exchange and says to Jairus, "Do not fear, only believe." When he arrives the mourners were already there, not losing any time. Jesus goes right toward the dead one, through the wailing cries and shrieks, enters the house and throws the rest of them out. With Peter, James, and John, and her parents looking on – can you imagine standing there in that room with Jesus, wondering what he was going to do? – Jesus took the young woman by the hand and spoke into the void of death, like God speaking into the void at creation, "Talitha cum." "Little girl, get up!" And she got up and everyone was overcome with amazement. "Tell no one about this [although I'm not sure how one keeps this a secret?] and give her something to eat."

To our ears and eyes, these miracle stories are just that, miracle stories, designed to prove Jesus' divinity, proofs, perhaps, of the veracity of Christianity, and because many have given up believing in miracles, these stories have lost some of their power. But is not the only way to read these events. Jesus was not the only one performing miracles in his age. In fact, in Mark's gospel the healings and miracles, in and of themselves are never meant to be proof for anything. If you go about trying to prove whether these things can happen or not, you've missed the point. *The point is Jesus and Jesus' point is to get us to fathom the way of God in the world.* It's not the healings, *per se*, that are significant, but *how* Jesus brings about healing, *how* he demonstrates such power, *what* they say about the kingdom, and *why* he does so. In fact, the way Jesus heals is risky. Even though the young woman is dead, "he violates and reverses the contagion of death by touching her," by reaching out.¹ And Jesus does this because he overheard people saying, "Leave Jesus alone, the girl is already dead."

You see, in both of these healings, people were searching for healing as an end in itself, and they were willing to do whatever it takes to get it. Once the girl was dead, Jesus was of no use and that's what Jesus overhears and apparently disturbs him. Jesus will not be "used" by us, Jesus will not meet us on our terms, Jesus will not be taken for granted, and he will not be manipulated. That's false religion and its killing us, I believe – faith that is instrumental, whether it is believing in order to be healed,

¹ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 200-203.

believing in God simply to assuage our guilt, or to make us feel better, or make our lives happier, or to have a guarantee we have real estate in heaven. This is not the belief that God calls us to. This is instrumental faith – *using God to get something other than God*. Healing is never an end in itself. Healing is placed in service to God, to reveal God's glory.

That's why I think Jesus is so eager to meet the woman who touched him. She needs to know something more than the blessing of physical healing, even though that will allow her to rejoin society. Did you notice when she returns, trembling and frightened, Jesus doesn't scold her? And what does he say to her, "Daughter." *Daughter*. Jesus wants her to know *him* – and know herself *through* him. He wants her to know who she really is. She has a new role, a new identity. He wants her to know that it was her risky faith in Jesus' power that made her well. Then he says to her, "Go in peace, and be healed of your disease." But, wasn't she already healed? She's not healed until *Jesus* says she's healed, really healed, in her depths. The physical symptoms were removed, but she needed to know who she really was. She was beloved of God and maybe needs to know that God is the source of all our healing, even when physical ailments have not been removed or have been removed. Perhaps our identity in God is what brings the deepest healing.

In both scenarios, both rich and poor, realize that they are not in control of their destinies, that they are powerless to bring about a different course of events. The older woman reaches out to touch Jesus to be healed. Jairus reaches out to Jesus and then Jesus touches the hand of the dead girl. Both scenarios tell us something about how God acts, but they also say something about our own search for healing. *Whether one is a woman or a man, in both situations, before healing takes place one has to admit that one is in need of healing*. And while this is true for both women and men, I think it is more difficult for us guys to admit we're in need of healing, that we have to rely or trust on anyone other than ourselves, and that we are, like all people, unable to provide the healing we need. Maybe that's why there are more women in the church than men (as it was from the beginning, starting at the empty tomb), because Christianity only "works" when one confesses one is in need of being saved, although we men are quick to fix (or try to fix) problems when we see them, we can't fix ourselves and we won't be fixed (or healed) until we admit that we're broken.² Maybe this is why it's so difficult for men to develop a satisfactory prayer life or spiritual life, or travel the hard and difficult road of going inward, because we know we will come to the point where we discover that we are not self-sufficient, that we're not as strong as we think we are (or make others think we are), that we aren't perfect and that we are really in need of God.

² Richard Rohr, *Adam's Return: The Five Promises of Male Initiation* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 11ff, 92ff.

How can Jesus make any sense to us if we don't see the need of a savior, a healer? But when we do, allow *God* to save us, allow *God* to heal us.

The poet, Leonard Cohen, declares in his poem, "Anthem":

*Ring the bells, that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack, a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.
That's where the light gets in.*

There is a crack in everything – in the world and our nation. On this Fourth of July weekend, how fitting it is to be reminded that even the liberty bell has a crack in it. There is a crack in the church, and in our communities, in families, in marriages, in our children, and in our heart of hearts. Instead of denying that they are there, I think we need to embrace them, befriend them, not run from them or be afraid of them. Because, I believe, it's through the cracks that the light does get in. Moral perfection is illusory. But when we confess who we are, when we acknowledge our need for deep healing, when we admit that we are not self-sufficient and really need God, then the light of God does pour in, and, oddly (!), precisely *through our imperfections* – as the great and wise religious mystics have said for centuries. It is through our imperfections, our cracks, our wounds, even our neuroses that God is at work within us and for us. Then we realize who we *really* are; at that point the illusions shatter. Only then can we hear God saying to us – indeed, after we have come to the table of our Lord, we might leave this place hearing, "My son. My daughter. Go in peace and be healed."

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