

## **“The Touch”**

Mark 5:21-43

*“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.’”*

The disciples thought maybe Jesus had been out in the sun too long. Suddenly, in the midst of a milling, moving mash of people, being jostled and elbowed, he stops dead in his tracks, scans the crowd with narrowed eyes and asks: “Who touched me?” “What are you talking about?” the disciples ask incredulously. “Everyone is touching you? How can you ask, ‘Who touched me?’” But of course, Jesus knew the difference between an inadvertent bump of the shoulder and the deliberate touch of one reaching out in faith and hope. He knew that among all that crush of people crowded around him someone had touched him with that kind of touch. Mark says that he sensed power going out from him.

It turned out to be a woman who came and kneeled before him. Mark tells us that she had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years and, he says, “she had endured much under many physicians and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse.” We might think the growing ranks of the unemployed who have lost their health insurance; or the person who uses the emergency room for primary care; or the one whose cancer treatments have been discontinued because the hospital can no longer afford to cover the expense. Or we might think of someone has been through the medical mill, seeing specialist after specialist, with still no clear diagnosis and certainly no cure, meantime depleting savings and retirement accounts.

Something like that is what this woman had endured. And in addition, she had experienced a certain amount of social ostracism because of the nature of her disease. Levitical code considered a menstruating woman to be ritually unclean and excluded her from participation in temple worship. The very fact that a woman considered to be unclean touches even Jesus’ cloak might have been scandalous to some. It is this woman who comes forward timidly, reluctantly when Jesus demands to know who touched him. She, too, knows that her touch was anything but inadvertent. It was, in fact, premeditated. Jesus looks upon her kneeling before him and says to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well (saved you, made you whole); go in peace (shalom, wholeness or well-being) and be healed of your disease.”

On a very basic level, this story is about human encounter, the kind in which both persons are affected and both go away changed. The woman goes away healed of her illness. Jesus goes away having been touched, having ministered, having felt power or grace or something of himself going out from him. He goes away knowing that from this encounter a woman’s life has been changed.

This story makes me think about all of the many encounters that you and I have with other people in our day to day living: the clerk who waits on you in the store; the neighbor you wave to; the fellow church member you greet on Sunday; even that one we may tend to take for granted who sits across the table from us every morning sipping coffee. Many of the encounters we have in a normal day are like those inadvertent bumps that Jesus felt as he was being jostled by the crowd. They are insignificant. They have no effect upon us. Others, though, have the ability to leave us changed.

But there are forces at work in the world these days that conspire against even the insignificant encounters. In the world we live in it is becoming ever increasingly possible to avoid almost any human contact. We put a credit card in the gas pump and pump our own gas and don’t even have to deal with a human being to pay for it. In some grocery stores you can check out yourself. We use an ATM to get cash. And if you dial an 800 number these days you find yourself most often listening to and speaking to a recording and only if you manage to make the right selections in the menu maze do you even have a chance of speaking to a live person.

In a newspaper article this week one writer decried what he called the “self-service city” where mounted overhead cameras have replaced the cop on the corner, and “software-and-camera laden vehicles...prowl the streets, taking pictures of license plates and tire position to catch those who dare try to get another 15 minutes out of a parking meter. This,” he suggests, “is City Hall without a face. Lovely Rita, Meter Maid – I miss you.”<sup>1</sup>

I haven’t had any dealings with a meter maid in a long, long time. But in another of those rare experiences of synchronicity, the morning after I put that last quote in my sermon about Rita the meter maid, I was downtown and had to run into a store for just a minute to pick something up. I want to say in my defense that it was before 9:00 (although I don’t know when they start counting), and although it’s true, there was no time showing on the meter, I would like to point out that the “expired” flag wasn’t showing all the way and the “violation” flag was not showing at all. Plus, as I said, I just had to run into the store for a minute.

But sure enough, here came the meter person. (What do you call a meter person who is a man? A meter man?) He looked at my car, he looked at the parking meter, and then he looked into the store, saw me and gave me a look that I would have to describe as something between exasperation and disgust. Well, of course, I ran right out and got a coin to put in the meter, all the while explaining to him about the flags and so on. And then, when he let me put the coin in without giving me a ticket, I thanked him. He seemed strangely touched by that gesture and with a genuine smile on his face he wished me an enjoyable rest of the day. I’m pretty sure that those software-and-camera laden vehicles described in the article are incapable of showing mercy or of wishing someone a good day.

Even the woman in the story was, in a sense, trying to affect a self-service healing. For maybe obvious reasons, she didn’t dare approach Jesus face to face and ask him to heal her, as others had done. She wanted to do it discreetly, surreptitiously, anonymously. “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” Her plan was to get in, get healed, get out, and not have anyone the wiser.

Some of us here understand that desire and can sympathize. Not all of us are extroverts anxious to meet and greet new people. Some love that time in the service when we all stand up and move around to greet one another in the passing of the peace, and others hate it. For many the appeal of a large church is that they can attend anonymously, slipping in and out without talking to anyone, without anyone discovering their name or even knowing that they had been there. One person who had been attending Westminster explained to friends that that was more or less what she was looking for, but she found it difficult here to be anonymous. People wanted to talk to her, they wanted to get to know her. That’s not a bad thing, of course, but it is not what she was looking for.

Although I understand how someone might feel that way, at the same time, I think that those who approach the spiritual life individually or who want to get their spiritual nourishment anonymously are missing a very important part of what it is all about – the community aspect.

One way of looking at what Jesus did when he called this woman out of the crowd is to say that he was interested in more than just her physical healing. Presumably, that had already been accomplished when he felt power going out from him. He could have let her be healed anonymously. But by calling her out from the crowd perhaps he was inviting her back into society again. She had been ostracized. Now she could once again be part of the community.

The other day at the Cayuga Home for Children, where Nick and I go once a week to meet with teenagers, we were asking the girls how many placements they had experienced. One girl said that this was her first residential placement, but that before this she had been incarcerated five times.

Last weekend her mother and her grandmother had come up from Brooklyn to see her and it was the first time in nine months that she had been able to touch either one of them. Before this she had been in a situation where visiting was done by telephone looking through glass. She said it meant so much to her to be able to hug her mother and her grandmother and to be hugged by them that it made her cry. This girl, by the way, is a lovely girl. We have seen an amazing change in her in the last few months. She is on the honor roll now. I would count the encounters at the Home each week as the significant kind.

Alan McGinnis, author of a book called *The Friendship Factor*, says that many of us tend to hold back in our warmth and affection toward one another. He says that we say “thanks” when we mean “God bless you,” and that we say “so long” when we mean “I’m really going to miss you.” In other words, we have the opportunity to touch and to be touched more often and more deeply than we think.

But then John Vannorsdall, former chaplain at Yale University, tells about his friend Harold, with whom a friendship began when he bought his house. It started out with asking questions about things like the furnace and fuses; then there were borrowed tools. And then, after a while, without anyone remembering how it started, the two couples began having dessert at each other’s house every other Sunday night. Each time there would be a phone call and a formal invitation. They were worlds apart politically. And Harold and his wife, from an older generation, were not quick to share intimacies. But they became good friends. John Vannorsdall writes: “I know that friends are sometimes people with whom we can share our deepest thoughts and needs, with whom we feel no hesitation and are unrestrained. I would welcome such a friend. But God sent me Harold, and perhaps sent me to Harold. And now I know that some formalness, some distance-keeping, can be an act of friendship too, that not everything must come to words, not every intimacy be spoken, and I am less threatened by the absence and the silences of God.”<sup>2</sup>

As Jesus moved through the crowds that day being touched by many people yet without any meaning attached to the touch, so too we meet and talk to so many people, clerks, neighbors, co-workers – often without any significance. We “bump into” or rub shoulders with so many different people in our daily living. But how often do we have real encounters?

I tried a little experiment this week. I tried coming out from behind the usual anonymity I tend to wear in public and decided to initiate conversations with just about everyone I saw. So one day when Diane had a procedure done, I spoke to the man working in the flower bed outside the medical center, the woman pushing a cart load of file folders, and a couple of different people in the elevator, a couple of nurses, and the lady behind the desk in the waiting area. Nothing too significant maybe, but all my efforts resulted in smiles and friendly chatter. I don’t know – I may have unleashed a monster. But this text kind of got to me. And, what can I say? I think it is worth the effort to try to connect more with each other. It seems like something Jesus would approve of. And sometimes in these encounters, as in the story, both parties go away changed.

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Egan, *The Self-Service City*, NYTimes, June 25, 2009

<sup>2</sup> Weavings, May/June '92