

“The Healing Touch”

Sermon: Year B, Pentecost 6, Proper 8, Lectionary 13

Text: Mark 5:21–43

Preached: July 1, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Grace and peace to you from the one whose touch makes us whole. AMEN

As I’ve mentioned to you before, as part of my seminary training I spent a summer learning to work as a chaplain down at Rush University Medical Center. As part of the program, I was required to do 24-hour on-call shifts. I would sit or sleep in the chaplain’s office, waiting for calls that might or might not come in the middle of the night. One night at about 1:00 AM, I got a call to come immediately to a room in the pediatric ICU. I rushed down to that floor, and walked in to witness a full reanimation team working on a 12 year-old girl whose heart had stopped. If you have never witnessed a hospital reanimation team in action, you can’t imagine how many doctors and nurses and technicians come running, pressing into small spaces to bring someone back to life. There is an all-out army of caregivers who press into the room.

I stood outside the ICU room, waiting to find out how I could help. The charge nurse told me that the girl had had a kidney infection for a week or so, and her father had ignored it, thinking that she was just not feeling well, and she would get better on her own. Instead, she had gone septic, and the infection had galloped through her body, causing her kidneys to fail, and then her liver. And now her heart had failed. Already three times that evening it had stopped, and the team had come in and gotten it beating again. They had warned her father that the drugs they had injected deep into this girl’s heart tissue would become less and less effective with each reanimation, and that there would come a point when the drugs simply would no longer shock her heart back to life. She had coded once more, and the father had begged them to try once again.

Her terrified father stood huddled in one corner of the girl’s ICU cubicle, pushed into the corner out of the way by the throng of doctors and nurses crowded around the girl’s bed. This dad was calling out over and over again, “Save my baby! You’ve got to save my little girl!” His cries and his efforts to get to his daughter’s side were impeding the work of the reanimation team. The charge nurse turned to me and said, “Chaplain, we’ve got to do something with him.” So the two of us worked our way around the edge of the group toward the father. He was a young African American man, in his late 20s, dressed in gang colors, his hands and neck covered with gang symbols and crude prison tattoos, not someone I usually would come into physical contact with. The nurse and I made our way around and through the crowd to get next to him. As we laid our hands on his arms to gently pull him away from what was going on, he looked at us angrily and then ignored us, shrugging off the hands we had placed on his arms, resuming his desperate pleas for the doctors to save his little girl. Finally, after even the most drastic measures had failed, the chief surgeon on the team shook his head, and looked up at the clock, and pronounced her dead. The father began to wail. There was nothing I could say. The only thing I could do was to place my arm around the man’s shoulders. The charge nurse grasped his hand. He turned toward me, lay his head on my shoulder, and crumpled to the floor in grief. I knelt down with him, my arms around him as he continued to sob against my chest. The nurse placed both her hands on his back, and we sat there for long, long minutes, saying nothing, just touching him, rocking with him, being present with him. There were no words, because really, what can you say at such a moment? There was only touch.

As you listened to that gospel story about these two healings, did you notice how many times touch was mentioned? Jairus, the wealthy and influential leader of the local synagogue, throws himself at Jesus’ feet, most likely grasping them as he pleads with Jesus over and over again to save his little girl, to please just come and lay his hands on her, touch her, to heal her. The crowd, desperate for healing and wholeness, presses in on Jesus, jostling him, reaching out their hands, begging for him to touch and heal them of the many things that ail them. In the middle of the crowd, the nameless woman, suffering for twelve long years from an ongoing discharge of blood from her uterus, impoverished by the outrageous fees her doctors have charged with nothing to show for it, alone in the world, desperately reaches out her finger to touch even the edge of Jesus’ cloak, believing that touch alone will be enough to heal her. And in the middle of the pressing throng, Jesus feels that touch, and knows that healing power has gone out from him. He stops and notices the woman. Then, in the presence of grieving, wailing parents, he takes a dead 12-year-old girl’s hand in his own, and by a touch and a word, restores her to life, restores her to her family. There’s a whole lot of touching going on. And it’s touch with power.

We don't grasp it fully, but in this story, touch is doing something else radical, something beyond the healing that we see. In this story, touch is also breaking down barriers. The woman's illness, because it involved both blood and shame, in that culture made her ritually impure. Any eating and drinking vessels she touched, any clothing, any chair that she sat on, would have to be ritually cleansed and purified. If they were earthen vessels, they couldn't even be cleansed, they had to be broken and smashed. Anyone who came into physical contact with her, anyone who touched her or even sat down on the same chair she had sat upon, was also rendered ritually unclean. She was rendered a virtual outcast by the nature of her ailment. So as she reaches out to Jesus, as she tremblingly dares to touch him, she does so with an understanding of herself that she is unclean, and bears the knowledge that by touching this holy man she will render him unclean as well. But in her desperation, she reaches out to touch him, thinking that maybe if she just touches his clothes it won't be so bad, and she can still be healed without him even knowing it. That's why she is so fearful when Jesus asks who has touched him. She fears the shame of the crowd, she fears the anger of Jesus. But instead, Jesus calls her "daughter," and tells her to go in peace, because that reaching out, that risk she has taken to touch him, that faith that she could find healing, has made her whole. It's interesting the word in Greek for "healing" is the same word for "wholeness," the same word for "salvation." In the gospels, salvation isn't about getting into heaven. Salvation is about finding wholeness and wellbeing, about being restored to life and hope and community.

So this now-defiled, impure Jesus goes to the house of Jairus, the powerful, named leader of the synagogue, and minutes after being made unclean by the touch of a bleeding woman, takes the hand of Jairus's dead daughter—and in doing so, he further defiles himself, because the act of touching a dead body makes him ritually unclean yet again. But for Jesus, touching and healing outweighs any consideration of who is and is not unclean, outweighs any consideration of the effect it will have on him. What matters for Jesus is touching people and bringing them back to life, bringing them to wholeness, bringing them healing of whatever it is that is draining the life out of them. There's healing in the touch.

You and I, sisters and brothers, are also called to be healers of those who are sick. We are called to be healers of those who feel their lives ebbing out of them. We are called to be restorers of life in those situations where it seems that death has gotten the upper hand. We are called to reach out and touch those whom everyone else calls unclean. We are called to reach out our hands and touch the lives of those who are lying in the dust of death and despair, and to lift them up. We are called to reach out and touch and embrace children who have been ripped from their mothers' arms. We are called to participate in the healing of our world, to become channels of the healing and restorative power of Jesus. But this healing and restoring business is one that requires hands-on contact. It is something that demands that you get your hands dirty. We can't just sit here and say, "Oh, wouldn't it be nice if God fixed all these things. God, do something!" We are called to be hands-on healers, healers who are out there in the world getting our hands soiled, touching people's lives in a very concrete and personal way, bringing healing everywhere we can bring healing by becoming people who touch others. There's healing in the touch.

At the same time, we are wounded healers. We are often like Jairus, pleading for healing for those we love. And we often are the nameless woman in the crowd. We, too, long for healing and wholeness in our desperate situations. We, too, want to reach out and touch and experience the power of God to restore us when we feel drained and emptied by the things that we experience. At the end of the service we will offer the opportunity for anyone who wishes to, anyone who is needing wholeness or healing for whatever it might be, to come forward for anointing and laying on of hands. As you feel the touch of my thumb as oil applied to your forehead, as you feel my hands resting on your head, as you experience that touch, may you feel the touch of Christ Jesus himself, may you feel Christ's own power flowing into you, and may you experience wholeness. There's healing in the touch. AMEN