***A HEALING TOUCH***

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Texts: Psalm 30:1-5 and Mark 5:21-43

 She had almost given up hope. She had been to the doctors, the specialists, the experts in diagnosis and treatment of rare diseases, the natural healers, and the medical centers which had done all they knew how to do. She had been there and done that and still the bleeding continued. Still the life flowed out of her drop by crimson drop, day by day, with no relief in sight. Her energies and finances were spent. All that remained was a sliver of hope that she might yet find healing for her body and rest for her soul.

 He too had almost given up hope. He had been to the same doctors, the specialists, the experts in diagnosis and treatment of rare diseases, the natural healers, and the medical centers which had done all they know how to do. He had been there and done that and still his daughter lay dying upon her bed. Still the life flowed out of her hour by hour, moment by moment. As death approached his little girl, he held on to a sliver of hope that he might yet find healing for her body and rest for his soul.

 They seem to have so much in common, these two figures in search of healing, this man and this woman grasping tightly to the same dim ray of hope for healing. But in truth they lived worlds apart!

 The woman’s bleeding had begun twelve years before and had never stopped. As a result, she was an outcast – ritually and socially unclean, forbidden to enter the synagogue, participate in worship, or share in any religious practices within the community. She was ostracized by her friends and shunned by her neighbors. She lived a life tainted by her own blood, a life which threatened to taint the lives of all those who came into contact with her, for she was ritually unclean, and anyone who touched her was made unclean as well, by law! Anyone who even lay on a bed in which she had slept was thereby unclean. It wasn’t a matter of hygiene; it was a matter of religious law. This woman whose name we do not know could find no cure for her disease nor for her ostracism from society.

The man whose daughter lay dying was, by contrast, highly regarded in the community. We know his name, Jairus, and we know that he was a leader of the synagogue, a man who lived by the law and was esteemed by the law, a man respected by the people, hailed on the street and welcomed into their homes. The illness that gripped his young daughter was of unknown origin, but it had not tainted his life or status, only his paternal heart which ached for her to live.

An outcast woman and a respected leader, both in need of healing – between them is represented a whole world in need of healing. As with so many diseases the coronavirus does not distinguish among rich or poor, respected or rejected, male or female. It attacks all, yet the chances of survival now vary widely with rich nations who can afford vaccines faring better than the poor ones who remain unvaccinated. Deaths in our own nation disproportionately impact people of color and the poor, not because the virus identifies them as such, but because access to quality health care is so much more difficult for them. Health disparities ripple across our nation for people of color and the poor whether urban or rural. Last year alone we saw dramatic drops in life expectancy for Americans, but the most significant drops were for Americans of color. We may think we have the best health care system in the world, but it is not equally good for all, and the only thing we do better than anyone else in the world is trauma care. If you are in a severe auto accident, the United States is where you want to be treated. For anything else – including cancer, hearts, births, and the common cold – someone else in the world does it better. That does not mean the best of our best is not the best; it often is. It does not mean that good care is not available; it is in many places! But statistically, the average patient in our nation is better off somewhere else – especially the average American of color. We are a nation in need of healing for COVID and for inequities and for ills that run much deeper in our society than any virus in a world that also needs healing for the virus and so much more!

Jairus and the unnamed hemorrhaging woman came from different worlds within a single community; yet both sought healing from the one man who could fulfill their slim hopes and offer new life. That one man was Jesus of Nazareth, the man who taught in parables and calmed the stormy sea and cast out a demon from a tormented Gerasene man. It was to this renowned healer that they turned with the hope that they might be saved; yet access to the hoped-for healer was very different for the synagogue leader and the unclean woman.

Jairus approached Jesus boldly, falling at his feet and begging him to come to his home to lay hands upon his daughter. He came directly to Jesus, the crowd parting to make room for him and then gathering around him; yet he laid aside personal pride to fall at the feet of a man who many in and around the synagogue despised. Humbly Jairus placed at the feet of Jesus not only his hopes for the healing of his daughter, but also his reputation within the synagogue. For Jairus believed in Jesus, believed that by laying hands upon his daughter Jesus could make her well. If only Jesus would take a moment from his busy schedule to come to his home and see her and touch her, his daughter might live. That was his hope and his plea.

When asked how she was able to continue her ministry among the poor in Calcutta in the midst of overwhelming need, Mother Teresa responded by looking at the child in her arms and saying, “*Because it is important that I help this one child now.*” One at a time. That is how Mother Teresa served, because that is how her Lord served. Jesus ministered to people one at a time – the blind, the lame, the lepers, those tormented by demons, the sick and suffering – because each and every one of them was important to God. We have no accounts of mass healings, of Jesus stretching out his arms to heal whole crowds of whatever maladies afflicted them, the healing of the ten lepers perhaps being the exception. His was a more personal approach, face to face, one by one, meeting the need of each person as they came.

That is the ministry to which we are called – serving people one by one. That does not mean that we do not address larger concerns like world peace, climate change, structural racism, and systemic poverty. But it does mean that we do not focus so much on the forest that we lose sight of the trees. There are men, women, and children in our community, in our neighborhoods, who are in need of help or healing, and we are called to minister to them, to meet them where they are, to listen to their concerns and address their individual needs – one by one. So we serve meals to the hungry at Trinity Soup Kitchen – plate by plate; we deliver food to Latin-American families in our community – home by home; we gather paper towels for Valley Mission – roll by roll; we take communion to Baldwin Park residents – cup by cup; we repair homes for poor neighbors – house by house. Do not think that simple acts of kindness for individuals are insignificant, for that is how we are called to minister to our neighbors, to love our neighbors, one by one by one by one...

The hemorrhaging woman was one of those healed by Jesus. She found him along the same road that Jairus met him on. Unlike the respected leader of the synagogue, she could not go directly to Jesus with her request. She had lived for twelve years in the shadows of society, and it was from the shadows that she reached out for healing. She remained anonymous in the crowd, bumped and jostled by nameless individuals who did not know who she was, who would have avoided her had they known, who would have sent her away had they known she was bleeding and so unclean. She moved through that crowd with the hope of getting close enough to touch Jesus’ cloak, not daring to speak to him, not daring to ask him for healing, but trusting that one touch of his cloak would be enough.

From the midst of the crowd, the bleeding woman reached out to Jesus and grasped his cloak for just a moment, and then let it go and melted back into the throng. She could feel a difference, could feel the healing that the simple touch of his cloak had offered. And Jesus too could feel the difference. In the midst of the hustling, bustling crowd, Jesus felt that touch that was different from all the rest, the touch of one in search of healing, one who believed that just a touch of his cloak might heal her. Jesus felt that unique touch of faith and recognized the need or pain of the one who reached out to him. So he asked, “Who touched me?” It must have seemed an odd question to the disciples, given the crowd that was pressing in all around him. Lots of people were touching him, but Jesus was searching for a particular one, the one whose sickness was so great and whose faith was greater still, and so he asked, “Who touched me?”

It was only then that she came forward and confessed what she had done. It was only then, when she was confronted by the one who had healed her, that the woman dared to fall at his feet as Jairus had done. Perhaps she expected his wrath to come raining down on her for having been so bold or reckless. Perhaps her fear of Jesus was the fear we know as awe. Or perhaps it was a mixture of both of those – fear of chastisement and awe at his power – that led to her trembling confession of what she had done. But Jesus’ words removed the fear from her heart and the trembling from her hands: “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” What joy must have filled her heart! Jesus had healed her body with a touch! By calling her “daughter” he offered healing for her fractured status within the community as well. Her faith had made her well, literally had “saved” her. But was it really her faith that saved her? Wasn’t it Jesus’ touch, the same touch that would heal Jairus’ daughter hours later? Are these not accounts of one healing divine touch rather than two healing faiths?

Faith and action are inseparable. If you truly believe, then you must act on your belief. As you have heard me say before, you can believe that someone could push a wheelbarrow across a tightrope stretched across the Grand Canyon. But that is not faith; faith is getting in the wheelbarrow! Jairus and the woman believed in Jesus, believed that he could heal them, and it was that belief that compelled them to seek his healing touch. In that sense their faith ***did*** heal them, because they trusted enough to act on it. Had they simply said, “I believe in Jesus,” and then stayed home waiting for the healing to come, they would have found none. But they did more than mouth the words, more than affirm their faith; they acted on it! They got up and went and sought him out, trusting that he could offer healing when no one else could. And so he did! Even when everyone else had given up hope for Jairus’ daughter and had declared her dead, Jesus was able to heal her and bring her back to life. For the power of God knows no limits – no limits!

Do you believe that? Do you believe it enough to trust God with your life, believe it enough to act on that belief day to day, to live as Jesus calls you to live and to love as Jesus calls you to love – loving your neighbors one by one by one, day by day by day? Do you trust Jesus enough to allow him to heal you of whatever ails you and to be the instrument by which he might bring healing to others? “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning,” sings the psalmist. With the coming of Jesus, the morning has dawned and with it there is joy and hope for healing – for our COVID-stricken world, for our fractured nation, and for ourselves. AMEN