

To Be Touched
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Mark 5:21-43 Common English Bible (CEB)

²¹ Jesus crossed the lake again, and on the other side a large crowd gathered around him on the shore. ²² Jairus, one of the synagogue leaders, came forward. When he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet ²³ and pleaded with him, “My daughter is about to die. Please, come and place your hands on her so that she can be healed and live.” ²⁴ So Jesus went with him.

A swarm of people were following Jesus, crowding in on him. ²⁵ A woman was there who had been bleeding for twelve years. ²⁶ She had suffered a lot under the care of many doctors, and had spent everything she had without getting any better. In fact, she had gotten worse. ²⁷ Because she had heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his clothes. ²⁸ She was thinking, If I can just touch his clothes, I’ll be healed. ²⁹ Her bleeding stopped immediately, and she sensed in her body that her illness had been healed.

³⁰ At that very moment, Jesus recognized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?”

³¹ His disciples said to him, “Don’t you see the crowd pressing against you? Yet you ask, ‘Who touched me?’” ³² But Jesus looked around carefully to see who had done it.

³³ The woman, full of fear and trembling, came forward. Knowing what had happened to her, she fell down in front of Jesus and told him the whole truth. ³⁴ He responded, “Daughter, your faith has healed you; go in peace, healed from your disease.”

³⁵ While Jesus was still speaking with her, messengers came from the synagogue leader’s house, saying to Jairus, “Your daughter has died. Why bother the teacher any longer?”

³⁶ But Jesus overheard their report and said to the synagogue leader, “Don’t be afraid; just keep trusting.” ³⁷ He didn’t allow anyone to follow him except Peter, James, and John, James’ brother. ³⁸ They came to the synagogue leader’s house, and he saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. ³⁹ He went in and said to them, “What’s all this commotion and crying about? The child isn’t dead. She’s only sleeping.” ⁴⁰ They laughed at him, but he threw them all out. Then, taking the child’s parents and his disciples with him, he went to the room where the child was. ⁴¹ Taking her hand, he said to her, “*Talitha koum*,” which means, “Young woman, get up.” ⁴² Suddenly the young woman got up and began to walk around. She was 12 years old.

They were shocked! ⁴³ He gave them strict orders that no one should know what had happened. Then he told them to give her something to eat.

She comes up to him in a crowd, a large crowd. She thinks she'll slip in unnoticed, get what she wants and slip away again. What she wants is to touch him. Well, not *him*, exactly, but just to touch his robe. That will be enough, she's convinced. If Rabbi Jesus is able to do anything for her medical condition, he'll do it through touch. She wants her health restored.

Before this overarching goal, everything else about her life fades into insignificance. Simply obtaining medical care in first-century Palestine was not easy. It was a much scarier time to live, especially for people with disabilities, than the society we know. Medical care was primitive, at best. There was no such thing as surgery to correct, say, a malformed hip or a clubfoot. If you were born with such a disability, you took the hand life dealt you and made the best of it. You had no other option.

In the midst of all this despair, there is one bright ray of hope: spiritual healing. From time to time, there comes along a rabbi or other person who seems to walk close to God. Such a person is reputed to have healing powers. Through their good offices, God may choose to intervene in the world, pressing the reset button of a human life and changing things back to the way they used to be.

This is what the woman wants: healing. Yet, she wants more. There's a part of her that wants to be seen again – to be whole again.

People who have been homeless, living on the street, will often say that the most difficult part of their ordeal is feeling invisible. They look to passersby for help, calling out to them even, but only a rare few will ever stop and look them in the eye. It feels dehumanizing. They feel like they are no longer people. They are mere obstacles on the sidewalk to be stepped around, avoided.

The late pastoral theologian Henri Nouwen once wrote of an address he gave to a student group at Yale University. Many of these students came from privilege and were going to privilege. They would graduate to become the leaders and professionals of the next generation. Yet, Nouwen told them, all their talent and triumphs would be meaningless if they failed to let their hearts be touched by the needs of those in front of them:

Why is it that we keep the great gift of care so deeply hidden? Why is it that we keep giving dimes without daring to look into the face of the beggar? Why is it that we do not join the lonely eater in the dining hall but look for those whom we know so well? Why is

it that we so seldom knock on a door or grab a phone, just to say hello, just to show that we have been thinking about each other? Why are smiles still hard to get and words of comfort so difficult to come by? Why is it so hard to express thanks to a teacher, admiration to a student and appreciation to the men and women who cook, clean and garden? Why do we keep bypassing each other always on the way to something or someone more important?¹

For this woman who has been medically suffering for 12 years, who has spent every last dime she had to be healed, who had apparently lost practically everything - becoming 'othered' by the society in which she lives --- Something happens there in the street with Jesus that's more than a mere transaction. Once Jesus stops everything to look for the woman, eye meets eye. Heart meets heart. Soul encounters soul. Somewhere, in that brief moment of communion, a spiritual connection is established. As the circuit closes, power rushes across the gap — and a human life is changed forever. It's called relationship.

She was healed – that's what we're told. Upon touching Jesus' robe, she was instantly healed. She knew it. Jesus knew it. Jesus could have kept on going. I mean, it's not like he wasn't in the middle of something important, right? He was going with an important leader of the synagogue to heal his dying daughter.

If you were Jairus, how would you feel? His words would not only mimic the disciples, but be more desperate:

Why are you stopping? What? Someone touched your cloak? Are you kidding me? EVERYONE is touching your cloak! Come, my daughter is dying, please let's go! Wait, she touched you? She's why you're stopping? You're stopping to talk with that beggar woman while my daughter could be dying? Please, let's go! I don't know how long she has.

Yet he stopped. He would not pass her by. Why?

Among the most poignant and memorable features of this healing story is this very personal moment.

The woman approaches Jesus anonymously, hoping to retain her place among the silent, gray army of beggars who dwell in the city streets. Let me be healed and return to my existence. But he won't let her go so quickly. She is seeking but a fleeting touch, something Jesus will scarcely notice, if at all. But he does notice. He chooses to notice.

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Out of Solitude* (Ave Maria Press, 2004) 41.

We certainly can feel for Jairus by putting ourselves in his shoes, but once we're able to trust that Jesus knows what he's doing, we can see that he's not simply ignoring or disregarding Jairus. While responding to Jairus, he also recognizes and sees this non-descript, assumedly homeless outcast of a woman and calls out to her. He looks her straight in the eye and performs for her a second healing. Jesus heals her of her anonymity.

Through her courage and boldness, seeking healing and wholeness, she gives Jesus an opportunity to teach, to love and to minister, to more than just she. She gives the crowd the opportunity to see how true faith in action works. That's a point not to be missed. She takes action. Doctors have failed her. Society has let her down. The paternalistic world that she's a part of has not prioritized her in any way. So, she decides to step forward and silently demand inclusion – in society, in life and in spirit.

Responding to her rejection of society's labels, Jesus does what others won't. He won't let her go away healed of her physical pains without something more; he wants relationship.

Yes, you're hemorrhaging has stopped, but are you loved and nurtured? Has anyone taken the time to look at you, ask you about your story, or listen to you? Stopping frustrates Jairus and confounds the disciples, but the crowds, as well as WE, get to see that Jesus sees healing as more than just the touch of a garment. It's human touch, personal touch, actual touch.

Studies show that the effects of touch can truly be nothing short of miraculous. Hugging someone can heal the body and the soul. Studies indicate that hugging someone for 20 seconds or longer (and I know that can be a long time), but it does have significant health effects – it lowers stress and blood pressure and moderates the heart rate. A 10-second hug may fight infections, boost your immune system, ease depression and lessen fatigue.²

From my work as a chaplain, there were many times when not a word was said, but all I did with a patient was hold their hand. Offer a grieving family member a shoulder, instead of a word. Presence and touch, as Jesus demonstrates, not only heals, but it can save as well.

Like the hemorrhaging woman, would that more people in our world could be healed of their anonymity, in addition to their physical ailments. Far too many people go through life starved of human touch. They feel marginalized, cast aside. They feel they don't belong in the larger community. They are the perpetual outsiders.

Part of our calling as Christians engaged in the ministry of healing — whether individual or social — is to beckon them to come out of the shadows. Our calling is to reach out and touch them.

This is the sort of experience people frequently have when volunteering. As almost anyone on a mission trips will attest, there's a world of difference between just signing a check in response

² <https://articles.mercola.com/sites/articles/archive/2014/02/06/hugging.aspx>

to an offering appeal and actually engaging in hands-on work to help, say, hurricane victims regain a safe, sheltered place to live. It also happens when instead of just donating money or food to a food bank, someone actually prepares the food and shares the meal with recipients – exactly like we do when we volunteer with Growing Home.

Those who share a meal with a needy Growing Home family or return from one of those mission adventures speak about the people they met, the families they were helping. Suddenly, it becomes a lot easier to make a casserole, swing a hammer or tape a piece of drywall. Suddenly, it isn't just mission carried out at a distance. It's become personal.

When you sit eye to eye across a dinner table and ask one of those people to please pass the meat loaf, it turns out the guests are just people, like anyone else. When you look them in the eye and they look back, the old stereotypes we've all heard, about people on welfare exploiting the system and the like, fall away. The people sleeping on the cots are brothers and sisters in need, that's all. And why shouldn't we extend to them not only material help, but also a measure of recognition? Why shouldn't we expand the boundaries of community, as we understand it, in order to take them in? Why should our lives be so important that we just pass them by?

That's what Jesus did. As I previously mentioned, "we can imagine the desperate impatience of [Jairus] when Jesus stopped to see who touched him....[but] the interruption offers food for thought" to us in our busy and chaotic lives. If we truly believe that God is in control, if we have faith that Jesus has the power to heal and save, may we never be so caught up in our own lives that we overlook the outcasts and those in need of loving touch.

"May we know Jesus' healing touch, his empowering presence, and his indiscriminate mercy in the midst of our desperate realities, summoning our faith and our voice, restoring us to wholeness and community, and raising us to a new life. And may Jesus' tangible, empowering, and patient compassion shape our own daily ministries in conformity to his own."³

AMEN.

³ Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 52.