

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 12, 2020

Touchable

Luke 8:40-56

Sadly, when we developed the guidelines for our church's reopening, we needed to include the following statement: "Everyone is asked to refrain from physical contact such as handshaking, hugging, or other forms of Christian greeting/fellowship." Though this rule applies to your entire time here at Sunday morning worship, it was crafted especially with the meet and greet portion of our service in mind. It's so different not hearing Willis conclude the opening hymn by announcing, "Please turn and briefly greet those around you."

Earlier this week, when I visited our day care center's three year old class, we talked about some of the new guidelines that shape their daily learning experience. On the wall was a poster summarizing the classroom rules. Rule number one: Keep your hands to yourself. Though it applies year round, it's especially pertinent during present circumstances. I understand that all of our day care children have been doing a great job of wearing their masks and practicing social distancing.

Across all age groups, whether on Sunday morning or Monday through Friday, we're learning more about contactless gatherings. We're minimizing the use of printed and hand-held materials. No bulletins. No hymnals. No offering plates. No greetings that involve physical contact. Keeping our hands to ourselves. And yet ironically, all this in the name of a Savior whose life and ministry were grounded in crossing barriers, making contact, and touching the untouchable.

In this morning's text from Luke, Jesus himself becomes the object of someone's touch. Sandwiched into the story of the raising of Jairus's daughter is the story of a woman who has been suffering from hemorrhages for 12 years. We often associate the word hemorrhage with the sudden bursting of a blood vessel that leads to uncontrollable, life-threatening bleeding. But Luke is referring to menstrual bleeding. According to one physician, this woman's chronic bleeding was probably due to tumors, polyps, or hormonal rhythms that were badly off balance. I'm no doctor, and I'm not going to venture into unnecessary detailed speculation about this woman's condition. But it helps to have at least a basic sense of her relentless physical suffering.

And not just her physical suffering, but her emotional, psychological, and spiritual pain as well. For one thing, her condition probably means that she is infertile. Her inability to have children cuts her off from the gift of motherhood, and the meaning and social status that come with it. What's more, as time passes and she enters old age, she may not have the kind of relational and financial security that come with having family.

Another devastating consequence of this woman's condition is her uncleanness according to the rules of ritual purity. The laws laid out in the Torah are designed to help God's people live properly regulated religious lives. But for her, the near-constant bleeding for 12 years means that she spends most of her time unclean. Those who know about her condition

don't welcome her. If she's married, her husband probably won't come near her during her impurity, which largely feels like all the time. She can't participate in religious services or activities. Everything she sits on or lays on is considered unclean. Everyone she touches, and everyone who touches her, is considered unclean.

No wonder this woman is desperate to get to Jesus. And the way she sees it, she doesn't need an extended healing session. She doesn't need a few verses of Scripture and a lengthy prayer. She doesn't need to have Jesus lay hands on her. Actually, all she wants to do is lay a hand on him. If she can just squeeze her way through the crowd, come up from behind Jesus, and grab hold of the edge of his clothes, that will be enough. And that's exactly what happens. As soon as she touches him, the bleeding stops. Her 12-year-long ordeal is over. Now she can just slip back into the anonymity of the crowd and go on with the rest of her life, restored.

But that's not enough for Jesus. He stops, turns, and asks, "Who touched me?" To Peter and the other disciples, this is a ridiculous question. "There are people crowded all around you, pressing in on you." says Peter. "Of course someone touched you." But Jesus is talking about more than just physical contact. He knows that the power of God at work through him, has done something for somebody. And that somebody is still nearby.

The woman realizes that she can't escape notice, so she steps forward, trembling. Not only because Jesus knows who she is, but perhaps also because she has violated the purity laws. She has willfully approached a holy person in the midst of her impurity. She has made Jesus unclean. Surely, while she's there at his feet, he's going to rebuke her and humiliate her in front of everyone.

But he doesn't. Instead, he reaches out to her with mercy, maybe even touches her. After all, we know from many other scenes in the Gospels that Jesus was prepared to violate a religious restriction in order to perform an act of compassion. So rather than distance himself from her, Jesus makes personal contact with her. He makes room for her voice and her story. She testifies in front of everyone about what the Lord has done for her. She bears witness to her experience of forgiveness, healing, and restoration. Jesus affirms her faith and gives her his blessing.

Luke then returns us to the story of Jairus's daughter, who by this point has died. But even the dead are not beyond the reach and touch of Jesus. He goes to the house and takes the daughter's hand, which is itself a violation of purity laws. Her corpse is considered unclean, so by touching her Jesus would be defiled. Yet once again, the saving power of God overcomes established barriers, and lives are changed by the touch of Christ.

Poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge once described how his three-year-old son awoke in the night and called to his mother. "Touch me, only touch me with your finger," the young boy pleaded. The child's mother was astonished and asked, "Why?" "I'm not here," the boy cried. "Touch me, Mother, so I may be here."¹ This story reflects our need to be touched by a source beyond ourselves to help us know that we exist and that we matter. I believe that's part of what's happening in the story of Jesus and the woman who had suffered from twelve years of sickness, and the isolation and social exclusion that came with it. Through his personal contact with her, Jesus makes her whole, not only in body but relationally as well. The touch of the Lord helps her, and the whole community, know that she exists, that she's here, that she belongs.

In an article on human personhood, Bob Smietana tells about a boy named Aaron Barg. When he was three months old, Aaron had a hernia that caused constant pain. According to

his parents, Steve and Susan Barg, it wasn't difficult finding a surgeon who could repair the hernia. But it was almost impossible to find an anesthesiologist. That's because Aaron was born with a rare genetic disorder that left him with a weakened heart and lungs and an underdeveloped brain. He was deaf and legally blind.

Doctors told the Bargs that Aaron would most likely die within a year. If he survived beyond that time frame, his life would have little quality. He would never speak, walk, or feed himself.

Most anesthesiologists regarded the risks as too high. They were fearful that any operation could kill Aaron. His mother noted how it was a challenge getting the medical community to regard Aaron as a person worth saving. Most of the time doctors didn't refer to him by name, but only "baby Barg." Susan would insist, "He has a name. Please use it."

During one medical visit, she asked an anesthesiologist if he would like to hold Aaron. He did so for a full hour, and only then did he agree to assist in an operation. Since then, the anesthesiologist has helped in several more operations for Aaron. "He holds Aaron, and he becomes a human being," says Susan. "Not a statistic, not a piece of medical research on a piece of paper, but a human being with a name who responds to touch and cuddling and love."²

Personal contact, including physical touch, is part of what makes us human. From the time a parent first holds you in their arms to the time when a loved one holds your hand as death nears, you need to touch and be touched. It gives us a sense of connectedness and relatedness that's essential to feeling valued and whole. So during this time when we're socially distanced, waiting and hoping for the eventual return of handshakes, hugs, and other displays of physical contact, we come together to hear the good news that we have a Savior who's touchable, and who treats us as touchable. He's not beyond our reach, and we're not beyond his.

In a few moments, we'll participate together in the Lord's Supper. This will be the first time we've shared the bread and the cup with one another since early March. Our method will have changed some, but the message has not. We still remember how Jesus died for our sins to make us clean and restore us to relationship with God. The cross is where we come into contact with God's power to forgive and heal. So let your eating and drinking be a way of reaching out to grab hold of Christ in faith.

¹ David Brooks, *The Social Animal* (New York: Random House, 2011) 45.

² Bob Smietana, "When Does Personhood Begin?" *Christianity Today* (July 2004) 24.