

“Come to Your Senses: In Touch”

Matthew 9:18-26

March 15, 2020

Rev. Dr. Emily J. Anderson



While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, “My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And instantly the woman was made well.

When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, “Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. And the report of this spread throughout that district.

Matthew 9:18-26

God, as we turn to your Word, may your Spirit touch us and move us to respond with our own words and deeds; in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Obviously, there’s been a lot going on this week as our country and the world have finally started to come to terms with the realities of this novel coronavirus and its potential impact. That’s one strand of the news which I think we have to pay attention to; to do otherwise would be irresponsible. But it’s not the only story out there, and this morning I want to point us back to a bigger story, a better story.

It feels like a year ago, but it was just last Sunday that I reminded you about our Lenten sermon series titled “Come to Your Senses.” The idea is to think about all the ways we experience God. Let’s be honest—we Presbyterians spend way too much time up in our heads, and so this series was intended to encourage us to find God not only with our minds or our hearts, but with our bodies—hands, feet, eyes, ears.

So it may be the highest form of cosmic irony that this is the week I had scheduled myself to preach on the sense of touch. Touch—except don’t touch, keep your hands to yourself. Minimize contact, distance yourself socially, isolate, self-quarantine—all of those terms we have heard over and over in the last 7 days seem antithetical to staying in touch.

An article in *The Atlantic* on Thursday raised some of the questions:

If I have a fourth date tonight, do I go? If I’m invited to a wedding in two weeks in another state, is it too late to cancel? If we’re on lockdown, and I live alone, can I walk to my friend’s apartment when I feel sad? If I end up officially quarantined, can I walk around the block at night for some fresh air? Can I go to the gym? Should I cancel my haircut?ⁱ

Those are some of the very real questions that people are asking, and between the fake news and the firehose of real news, it’s hard to know what to think.

And as one public health official put it, “many of the recommendations we’re making are about increasing the distance between people, but of course, being close to people is what makes life a pleasure... So this is going to be a very difficult time. No question.”ⁱⁱ

+ + +

That all contributed to the decision to take our worship services online this morning, but while I've been thinking about that, I kept going back to this story from Matthew 9. Jesus is preaching and teaching when a leader of the synagogue interrupts to say that his daughter has died, but then tells Jesus, *if you will come and lay your hand on her, then she will live*. This is a leader of the synagogue, remember, the guys who are supposedly threatened by Jesus and plotting his demise. But this father is desperate, and will stop at nothing. Any of you who are parents know what that's like.

So Jesus and his disciples are following the synagogue leader to his home when Jesus is interrupted again, this time by a woman who has been hemorrhaging blood for 12 years. She, however, does not try to get Jesus' attention; she just wants to slip in behind him. *"If I can only touch his cloak,"* she says to herself, *"I will be made well."*

You heard the story: that's exactly what happens. She touches the fringe of his cloak, Jesus turns and sees her and says, *"Take heart; your faith has made you well."* A few moments later, when he arrives at the home of the synagogue leader, the musicians have already gathered for the funeral procession. Jesus goes inside, takes the dead girl by the hand, and she stands up, very much alive.

These are just two in a string of healing miracles in Matthew 8 and 9. Jesus stretches out his hand and touches a man with leprosy, and the man is cured. Jesus arrives at Peter's house where his mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. Jesus touches her; immediately she is healed.

In chapter 9, two blind men approach Jesus crying for mercy. *"Do you believe that I am able to do this?"* he asks. They say yes, he touches their eyes, and their eyes are opened.

See the pattern? Jesus touches a person in need of healing, and they are cured. Jesus touches someone who is ritually unclean according to religious law, and she is restored. Jesus touches a little girl who is dead, and she returns to life.

There's the thread: Jesus touches and lives are changed. Seems simple. But maybe there's more to it than that.

+ + +

I expect that like me, a lot of you have figured out this week that when someone tells you not to touch your face, suddenly you find yourself doing it absentmindedly 300 times a day. Maybe you saw the short video clip of the spokesperson giving a public health briefing about how important it is to keep your hands away from your face, because that's a primary way viruses are transmitted. But when she has to flip to the next the sheet of paper, and can't—ON LIVE TV—she just licks her thumb and turns the page.

Touch is essential to helping us find our way around in the world. But touch is so much more. Touch is a primary way we connect with one another. Think of ET reaching out that long scraggly finger to Elliot, or God stretching out a hand to Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Think of a mother cradling a newborn, or a person reaching for the hand of a grieving friend. Touch is one way we connect with one another.

And so in a time when we're asked to refrain from touch, it makes me all the more curious about exactly what is going on when Jesus touches and heals people in the gospels.

And, what happens when Jesus isn't around to touch, or be touched?

When that hemorrhaging woman reaches for the hem of Jesus' robe, is there some supernatural current running through his clothing that reconfigures all the molecules in her circulatory system? When Jesus takes the little girl's hand, does his autonomic nervous system emit electrical impulses that jumpstart her heart and lungs so she's raised from death to life? Maybe.

I mean, if you're asking me, does Jesus have the power to do that sort of miraculous healing, of course he does.

But do I think that's actually what happened? Not really. He could have—but I think Jesus touching or being touched by those sick people is about making a connection. And connections are what keep us alive, and healthy and human and whole and holy.

+ + +

That's why this whole business of social distancing is so difficult. Even though Jesus is no longer among us in person, we have become for one another "Jesus with skin on," as the saying goes. Now we're having to curtail even that to some degree.

So I want to challenge you to do something this week. I want you to think about two people you might see we were here in the sanctuary as usual this morning, or any two people you know. Think especially about those who may not have lots of connections, or who may not be in regular contact with others. Would you reach out this week to two people, just to tell them you're thinking about them wonder how they're doing? Maybe you can do that electronically, or maybe you go old school, with a telephone call, or even or a postcard and a stamp.

Maybe you can be "Jesus with skin on." Because that's who we are called to be for one another. The Word made flesh, the beloved community, the body of Christ.

Amen.

ⁱ Kaitlyn Tiffany, "The Dos and Don'ts of 'Social Distancing,'" in *The Atlantic*, March 12, 2020.

ⁱⁱ *ibid.*