

The Healing Touch

St Philip's Anglican Church,
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Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B — 1 July 2012

Lamentations 3.22-33; Psalm 30; 2 Corinthians 8.7-15, Mark 5.21-43

It is well known that Jesus is presented as a healer in the first half of Mark's gospel. Less known are two dominant patterns common to most of these healings. The first pattern concerns the types of people Jesus healed: a leper, a paralytic, a man with a withered hand, a bleeding woman, a dead girl, and two blind men.

The Torah classifies such people, due to their respective conditions, as ritually unclean. Because such impurity was deemed contagious, various rules served to isolate the person socially. Lepers are to wear torn clothes, have dishevelled hair, and cry out, "Unclean, unclean," so as to warn people of their proximity. The leper, "shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp" (Lev. 13.45-46). During her menstrual period a woman is likewise considered to be in a state of "impurity," and anyone who touches such a woman becomes unclean. A woman who bleeds beyond seven days is in a perpetual state of "uncleanness," and whatever she sits upon during this time becomes unclean, as does anyone who touches these things (Lev. 15.19-28).

Those with physical "blemishes" were forbidden from giving offerings to God. Such people included the "blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles" (Leviticus 21.16-20). Corpses are apparently unclean, for anyone who touches them becomes unclean, and any who fail to purify themselves after such contact shall be "cut off from Israel" (Numbers 19.11, 13a).

Nine of the twelve specific individuals Jesus heals in Mark have conditions that are cause for social exclusion. Seven people have a condition that the Torah specifically labels as unclean or impure, and which can infect others. These include the leper, paralytic, man with a withered hand, Jairus's daughter, the bleeding woman, and the two blind men. Two others, the demoniac and the man with a hearing and speech impediment, are good candidates for social exclusion. The former is associated with three "unclean" elements: an unclean spirit, tombs, and a great herd of swine (5.2, 3, 8, 11). The man's hearing and speech problems might classify him with the physically disabled that Leviticus prohibits from giving offerings to God (Leviticus 21.16-20).

When Jesus heals these people he removes the cause of their social exclusion, thereby enabling them to participate in the community. His healings do not merely make individuals "well"; they rather integrate and restore the socially marginalized into society. The leper need no longer dwell "outside the camp." The bleeding woman is now able to touch and be touched. The primary effect of Jesus' healings is thus not personal but social. He restores the outcasts to the community, and, in doing so, perhaps restores the community as well. Jesus' words to the healed demoniac ("Go home to your friends...") reflect this interest in reintegrating the marginalized (Mark 5.18-19).

Jesus' healing practices involve restoring social outcasts to community.

There is a lot of tactility in today's Gospel, a lot of sheer physicality, a lot of touching. Jairus falls at Jesus' feet. He begs Jesus to place his hands on his daughter. The people are swarming (Mark 5.24; CEB). A woman is menstruating.

A woman is touching a man's clothes in public; a woman who can sense things in her own body.

Jesus can tell when power goes out of him. A crowd is pressing against Jesus (Mark 5.31; CEB). The woman falls down in front of Jesus.

Touching Bodies

There is simply something about touching and healing, and there is no getting around the touching and feeling and healing here in Mark. It's a sweaty, swarming crowd, and in the middle of this teeming crowd there are people bleeding, and others willing to fall in the dust or the muck at the feet of one man in that crowd.

For such a short gospel, Mark devotes an inordinate amount of space to describing the details of how people move their bodies, where they place their hands, in and around what is actually spoken. It is as if the two — touching and proclaiming — are intimately connected.

So, you see, a second pattern in many of Jesus' healings in Mark is physical contact. "A leper came to him ... Jesus stretched out his hand and touched (Mark 1.40,41a). "Then [Jesus] ... went in where the child was. He took her by the hand. (Mark 5.40,41a) "But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand." (Mark 9.27).

"He took the blind man by the hands and when he had put saliva in his eyes and laid his hands on him ... Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again" (Mark 8.23, 25a).

These descriptions of touching are not coincidental. Mark's emphasis through repetition is evident both in the latter example and in the healing of the bleeding woman:

"She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well' ... Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who *touched* my clothes,' and his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who *touched* me?'" (Mark 5.27-31).

Mark highlights the physical contact between Jesus and those he heals. Jesus touches six of the twelve people he heals in Mark, the leper, Jairus's daughter, the bleeding woman, the man who is deaf and has a speech impediment, one of the blind men, and the child with an unclean spirit. On two other occasions, Mark notes that touching occurs between Jesus and large groups of people he heals (Mark 3.10; 6.56). Such touching is significant given the Torah's insistence (noted in Leviticus and Numbers) regarding the contagious nature of impurity and uncleanness. The implications of such touching would be clear to Mark's readers/hearers familiar with Torah: Jesus is willing to become impure and unclean in order to restore outcasts to community. Although he demonstrates an ability to heal from a distance (cf. Mark 7,29-30) he tends to touch, even if this means becoming unclean or impure. Jesus was willing to get dirty, as is evidenced by putting his fingers into the ears of a deaf man, and touching the man's tongue (Mark 7.32-37).

Do we, as a Christian community, alter the conditions of people's lives? Do we bring healing into troubled circumstances?

Are we prepared to also cross boundaries — whether they are related to ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation, politics or any other boundaries that divide our society — and advocate life-giving meaning and change?

May God grant us the courage to do so!