

THE GOOD TOUCH

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: I Kings 17:8-10a, 17-24; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

At the church we've been doing a lot of work to educate the staff, the teachers, the nursery school, everyone who has contact with children about the importance of protecting little ones from unwanted and inappropriate touching. It's a program called "Reducing the Risk," and it's meant to protect the most vulnerable in our midst.

One of the most painful experiences I ever had in the ministry was chairing a presbytery committee some years ago that inquired into the misconduct of another pastor. To talk with parents and children about the hurtful encounters that they had experienced with this minister was heartbreaking. And the minister's inability to grasp the enormity of what he had done was equally sad. There is something about that kind of experience that you never get past. A hurt for all the parties involved that perhaps only God can heal.

There isn't a child today that is not taught the difference between the good touch and the bad touch. The good touch is the arm of a parent around a child that confirms approval. The good touch is the nine year old or twenty-nine year old daughter who leans her head against her dad and falls asleep on the couch while watching a movie together. The good touch is the boy who learns to rough house with his mom, play tag or capture the flag and end that play with a sweaty, breathless embrace. The good touch is the fleshy spooning of the couple who have been married for thirty years and who still sleep in tandem beside each other, shifting to accommodate the knees and legs and arms entangled through the night. They all represent the desirable touch of human contact, the *good touch* that brings healing.

A friend told me about an Anglican priest whom she heard being interviewed on BBC last year. The priest said that in England there are many laws protecting children against being inappropriately touched, and rightly so, but he cautioned that if these children never receive the *touch* of blessing, they will never learn how to be *people* of blessing.

Lewis Thomas, who was President of Memorial Sloane Kettering in his book, **The Youngest Science: Notes of a Medicine-Watcher**, wrote that the problem with young physicians is that so few of them have ever been seriously ill, and so do not know that all healing emanates from touch. "Touching," he said, "is the most effective act of doctors."¹

In that vein I have read about the work of Dr. Ahmet Oz at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, one of the top heart surgeons in the nation. He is given to using homeopathic medicine as a first recourse, recommends massage as a stress reducer, aromatherapy, rest and natural healing. When he performs heart surgery, though his patients are anesthetized, he sometimes has a massage therapist giving foot or head massage to the patient during the operation in order to add an extra level of deep relaxation and human contact in this most sterile of settings.

Today we have read three healing stories from scripture, all involving touch. The first is the story of Elijah who was sent by God to the village of Zarephath where there was a widow living in the outlying region, not a Jewish woman, not among the chosen, an outsider. Elijah, in a time of drought and starvation, was ordered by God to go to this woman and provide her with oil and meal so that she and her household might survive.

While Elijah was there, the widow's son became seriously ill and died. The scribe of I Kings says "there was no breath in him." So Elijah took the boy, laid him on his bed and then lay upon him three times, a kind of early cardiac external resuscitation, crying out to God, "O Lord, my God, let this child's life come into him again." And the boy revived.

It is a miraculous story, one that we share with Judaism, and that represents the power of God to overcome the power of death. But it is the healing touch of Elijah's body that is the means of God's creative intervention and so it is a most remarkable story for its physicality and tactile power.

The second two stories are a pair of healings that come from Matthew's gospel and that begin with the unusual account of a leader in the synagogue who comes to Jesus and interrupts him to say that his daughter has just died. He begs Jesus to come and lay his hand upon her and revive her. So Jesus got up and followed him with his disciples.

While they were on their way, a woman with a hemorrhage who had been suffering from her malady for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak. Jesus turned around and recognized the woman who touched him and said, "Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well." And that very instant, in spite of twelve years waiting on test results and getting blood work and going for x-rays and undergoing pelvic exams and sitting endless hours in waiting rooms reading old issues of People magazine, this patient woman's illness ended.

At which point the story of the daughter of the leader in the synagogue resumes. Jesus arrived at the house and he found things there to be the way it is when a child dies and the family has gathered to be together to provide comfort to one another. Everybody's crying and the mother is inconsolable and the father is distraught and the little ones are looking at the adults in bewilderment, unsure what the meaning of all this may be.

The sad music is playing. Matthew says the flute players were there, customary visitors on such occasions as funerals, like bagpipes at the cemetery today playing *Amazing Grace*, or the congregation singing *Abide with Me* at a memorial service. Jesus tells them to put away their Kleenex boxes, turn the radio to something more joyful, because the little girl is not dead, but sleeping. And they all laughed at him.

He cleared the room, he took the little girl's hand and she got up and sure enough, she was well. Matthew says the report of this healing was front page news throughout the district the next morning.

In each of the three stories we have remembered today there was a healing borne of a touch. And believe it or not each of those touches was not without controversy.

Jews as a religiously observant people have always been very conscious of the body. Modesty was and is a hallmark of the observant Jew. Men and women worship

separately in the temple. Among the Orthodox, men and women do not even share the same swimming pool. Men, with the exception of the bonds of marriage, are never in the strictest sense to come into physical contact with women, primarily for reasons of ritual purity.

For Jesus to be touched by a woman with a hemorrhage was to render him unclean under Jewish law. And for Jesus to touch a little girl, compounded by the fact that she is dead, is a serious breach of law. The same would pertain to the unseemliness of Elijah laying his body upon the corpse of the son of the widow of Zarephath.

Touch in all three cases was quite extraordinary, and the fact that Elijah before him, and Jesus following much later, broke with tradition and custom and law and expectation to do what they did in the name of mercy as an expression of God's loving power was quite extraordinary.

Jesus acts in harmony with that which he said earlier in the passage read today, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" For those who would do God's will it is better to err on the side of mercy than it is to slavishly observe the requirements of ritual.

Some years ago I was in the hospital for a period of time. And a stream of my colleagues in the ministry in the community came to visit me. During these pastoral visits, my hospital room became a classroom in what to do and what not to do at a person's bedside. Some of my minister friends stood across the room and never took off their coat or shook my hand or really stepped into the light so that I could see them very well. Some stood at the end of the bed so that I could barely see them and I suppose to assure that they didn't catch any of my non communicable germs.

Some of them offered to pray, and pulled out a prayer book to guide them. But the one colleague whose visit meant the most to me was a young priest who came into the room and sat down for a short while and listened to me, found out what my experience was like, and heard my fears and my hope.

He took my hand before he left and prayed with me a heartfelt prayer of intercession asking for God's healing grace to rest upon me. He even brought a small cruse of oil and anointed my forehead for healing. It was not as much my tradition as his, but the touch of the oil and the earnestness of the cross he traced on my head, gave me strength.

He got the prize for best pastoral visit, and maybe it was the fact that he simply knew that what I needed most was the touch of another human being to remember the fact that I was not untouchable, not beyond help; that what was happening to me as a patient in the hospital which felt so often like an out of body experience did not mean that I could not still find help and encouragement in the communion of others.

A friend told me about the experience of her ministerial colleague when he volunteered to go and provide emotional support to students at the Tri-Delt house on the campus of the University of South Carolina. You may remember that six USC and one Clemson student lost their lives in a house fire at the beach at Ocean Isle, North Carolina last October.

The thought was that the campus ministers could offer emotional support to the students who had lost friends and classmates the night before. But the counseling didn't go very well, not because the students were out of touch with their grief. Instead, the minister said, "...the weird thing was the place was packed, but people weren't really talking to each other. They were all on their cell phones with their parents or text messaging their friends. They were gathered in their grief but there was little sense of shared community among them in the same room."²

One of the problems of life today is that we are so technologically connected that we are in touch all the time with everyone and yet spiritually connected with so few. We know the latest news flash, the most recent comment of our colleague at work on the Blackberry, the scores at Yankee Stadium and at Madison Square Garden, but in spite of that we have not made a truly satisfying spiritual connection with others in all this long time.

Dating today is often a matter of an internet connection and a Facebook page, but conversation has become a lost art, the sharing of values and thoughts face to face is passé, the opening of one's heart to another in trust has become rare.

How interesting it is that the rituals of our Christian faith are so dependent on tactile responses. We are of all religions particularly sensory; using water, bread, and wine as the sight and sound and touch and smell and taste of faith. We rely on the good touch as a sign of God's grace.

Think of the rituals of the church year and its seasons. In baptism we use water to make the sign of the cross on the forehead. On Ash Wednesday we impose ashes. We anoint those who are sick. We join hands in marriage. We hold hands in prayer. We pass the peace. We lay on hands at ordination. These are all ancient signs of the life giving power of Christ. It's our way of reaching out, like that woman with the hemorrhage, for the hem of Jesus' garment for some meaningful connection to the holy.

I suppose in a world where there has been so much inappropriate touching, we have reacted protectively. We have widened the perimeter of our own personal space, and looked with suspicion on people who do not seem to respect appropriate boundaries. But in the process of assuring safety we should not forget that what we most long to have is not distance from others but connection. Not alienation from those with whom we share life, but affection. Henri Nouwen calls it the movement from "hostility to hospitality."³ He writes,

In our world full of strangers, estranged from their own past, culture and country, from their neighbors, friends, and family, from their deepest self and their God, we witness a painful search for a hospitable place where life can be lived without fear and where community can be found.⁴

That is, I think, what the church is meant to be, a place where alienation is overcome and meaningful connection with others can be created.

Jesus often tells stories of a God who seeks out those who are lost. What is the parable of the prodigal son, if not a story of a God who longs to welcome us in his embrace? What is the parable of the lost sheep if not the very image of a God who seeks the one that has ventured far away, and who bring him home on his shoulders rejoicing?

In both the stories of Elijah and Jesus performing healing acts, we have the very image of a God who would go to any length to make real and to put in flesh and blood the love that can only be expressed concretely. Theirs is the good touch of God's healing love and welcome.

I remember a woman some years ago describing to me the tender loving care that her mother received in the nursing home where she lived. Jane's mother had lived well into her nineties, but as the years went by her mother became more volatile in mood swings and temperament.

She told me about a particular evening when she had been visiting her mother and the hour became late. Her mother was restless when the aide came into the room and said it was time to get ready for bed and said she would help the older woman get ready for the night. "Now remember Edna," she said, "first we'll brush your teeth, and then we'll wash your face, and then get you into your nightgown, and get you all tucked in." But as the aide reached down to lower the footrests on the wheelchair, Jane's mother took a swing at the aide with her cane.

"Now, now, Edna," said the aide gently taking the cane away, "Let's do the best we can. I'm here to help." And together, Jane and the aide helped her mother brush her teeth, and wash her face, and change into her nightgown, and get into bed.

I will never forget how Jane described the last part of the night's ritual. The aide lowered the lights a little bit except for the night light and the glow of the moon in the window, and she got out some cream and slowly put it on Edna's wrinkled and weary feet. She sat there for probably fifteen minutes gently rubbing first one foot and then the other with the lotion, and speaking gently and softly to Jane and her mother, soothing Edna's restless spirit with her touch. When the foot massage was over, the aide gently pulled the covers up under Edna's chin and kissed her on the forehead, and said goodnight. But Edna was fast asleep, and Jane, sitting beside the bed, was amazed by the transformation that mercy and kindness had wrought.

I wonder if in heaven that's what they do every night? Rub your weary feet and turn down the lights and let the moon shine into the window. And I wonder if it isn't the angels who do the tender duty of massaging with healing hands the tired feet of weary servants, even the ones who are the most difficult to love.

I wonder if heaven is like that. No, I'm actually counting on the hope that heaven is like that. Counting on the hope that the good touch of God's grace and healing care is the last thing we feel at the coming of the night and the first thing we know when the morning breaks.

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¹ As quoted by David Kuhl, M.D. in **What Dying People Want: Being Touched, Being in Touch**. (PublicAffairs, David Kuhl: 2002)

² As told by Agnes Norfleet in her paper on this text at the Moveable Feast, 2008, unpublished.

³ Henri Nouwen, **Reaching Out**. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975.)

⁴ Ibid. p. 46.