



"A Healing Touch"

Text: Mark 1:29-39

a sermon by the Rev. Kevin Scott Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

There are great benefits to being people who trust in the reality of science. No matter our age, most of us grew up in, were educated in, and live in a world where science informs every aspect of our lives. To live between the years of 1950 and 2050 is to live in a century of constant and astounding change and most of that change is the result of extraordinary scientific discovery and development.

But, there are time when our scientific outlooks and applications get in the way. Take a healing story - our story from Mark - for example. Jesus touches the mother-in-law of Peter and she immediately rises to her feet, free of fever, and begins serving those in the house. Some of us might have a problem with that story. A simple touch is usually not the cure for a disease. It sounds a little too magical - a little too simplistic - a little naive.

In one of the episodes of the series *M*A*S*H**, the chaplain, Father Mulcahy, is called to a patient who is dying. Mulcahy takes the nearly dead man's hand and prays. Suddenly, the man gasps for air, his heartbeat is stronger, and the doctors begin their live-saving work. "Thanks, Father," one says to the priest. He responds, "it's not supposed to work that way."

Exactly. It's not supposed to work that way, our scientific minds tell us. It ought to take longer, if it is to bring change at all.

Jesus was well-known for bringing healing and wholeness to people. Whether it was casting out demons, or bringing healing, or challenging the powers of death - wherever Jesus went, he challenged the brokenness in which he found people and brought peace and wholeness. It was the reason Jesus entered the world - his life's purpose: to bring wholeness where there was brokenness.

No matter how fantastical the story may sound, it is a pronouncement of the truth. In the presence of Jesus, brokenness is replaced with wholeness, with unity, with peace. In the presence of Jesus, that which was not right is fixed. In the presence of Jesus, the shattered and fragmented are restored and renewed.

Tony Campolo tells a story about being in a church in Oregon where he was asked to pray for a man who had cancer. Campolo prayed boldly for the man's healing.

That next week he got a telephone call from the man's wife. She said, "You prayed for my husband. He had cancer." Campolo thought when he heard her use the past tense verb that his cancer had been eradicated! But before he could think much about it she said, "He died." Campolo felt terrible.

But she continued, "Don't feel bad. When he came into that church that Sunday he was filled with anger. He knew he was going to be dead in a short period of time, and he hated God. He was 58 years old, and he wanted to see his children and grandchildren grow up. He was angry that this all-powerful God didn't take away his sickness and heal him. He would lie in bed and curse God. The more his anger grew towards God, the more miserable he was to everybody around him. It was an awful thing to be in his presence."

But the lady told Campolo, "After you prayed for him, a peace had come over him and a joy had come into him. Tony, the last three days have been the best days of our lives. We've sung. We've laughed. We've read Scripture. We prayed. Oh, they've been wonderful days. And I called to thank you for laying your hands on him and praying for healing."

And then she said something incredibly profound. She said, "He wasn't cured, but he was healed."¹

And there is a truth worth celebrating. There is a great difference between being cured and being healed. Healing may not be the restoration to health that we expect, but it may be the restoration of mind and spirit that enables us to face whatever brokenness may still remain.

You might be surprised at how many times the Bible refers to touching. It happens all the time. Touching is an expression of human connection. In the second story of creation, in Genesis 2, God says, "it is not good for the creature to be alone." God created us for community and an expression of that community is the ability to touch.

Perhaps that is why there is no greater betrayal of community than when touch becomes destructive. When touch is inappropriate and misguided, it becomes destructive to the one being touched. And when that kind of inappropriate touch is felt in the community, far too often disunity and dissension are created.

But, go back to your first psychology class (if you had one). One of the first lessons we were taught was the lesson of the study of rhesus monkeys that were denied contact with their mother. The little monkeys went crazy. There was no touch in their lives. Given the opportunity, many of the little monkeys formed a bond with a “mother” made of wire and cloth. The little monkeys would hold on to the substitute mother and were comforted. Similar studies have been made with children who were deprived of significant human contact as infants. The results were nearly the same.

We were created to be in community - to connect - and, yes, to touch.

One of the most distressing aspects of the pandemic has been the inability to touch. We have heard the soul-rendering stories of those who were not able to be with - to touch - a loved one who was dying. We have experienced for ourselves the pain of not being able to touch, to shake a hand, to hug a friend. We have lost an essential part of our humanity because of our inability to touch.

But it has reminded us of the power of a touch. A friendly pat on the back. A moment of holding another’s hand while we speak. Wiping a tear from another’s eye. In that simple action of touch, we bring healing to each other.

Dr. Gerald May is a medical doctor and psychotherapist, whose book *Addiction and Grace* is amazing. In that book, Dr. May says:

God’s grace through community involves something far greater than other people’s support and perspective. The power of grace is nowhere as brilliant nor as mystical as in communities of faith. Its power includes not just love that comes from people and through people but love that pours forth among people, as if through the very spaces between one person and the next. Just to be in such an atmosphere is to be bathed in healing power.

Isn’t that what we have really been missing? Being submerged in a river of grace where all are made well and restored? Being close enough - physically close enough - to extend and receive a touch?

And if that is true enough for the church, imagine the pain and brokenness of those who have no community of grace to call their own. The world is a broken, fractured, and dismembered place. The world is divided and disjointed as perhaps it has ever been. The world is a lonely and isolated place, filled with estrangement and disconsolation. People are experiencing abandonment and rejection. They feel forgotten and neglected.

It is to those people - and to the planet itself - that we are called to offer a healing touch. One of the lessons of Judaism that I love is the teaching of *Tikun Olam*. Some traditions of Judaism understand this as

the overcoming of idolatry, while others interpret it living and acting in constructive and beneficial ways for all people. The Mishnah teaches that *Tikun Olam* is the healing of the earth. *Tikun Olam* is touching the earth and its inhabitants in order to offer healing, repair, restoration, correction, and even establishment of something new. It is, in every way, the call to offer “a healing touch.” It is still more ground that Jews and Christians and Muslims (though they would call it by a different name) - it is the common ground we share as the descendants of Abraham. We are all called to offer a healing touch to the brokenness of our world.

Dr. Richard Selzer, in his book *Moral Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*, offers us this scene:

I stand by a bed where a young woman lies, her face post-operative, her mouth twisted - palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the line to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed...to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve. The young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me private... “Will my mouth always be like this?” she asks. “Yes,” I say, “it will. It is because the nerve was cut.” She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. “I like it.” he says. “It’s kind of cute.” He bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close that I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate her, to show her that their kiss still works...I hold my breath and let the wonder in.³

And there is our calling. You and I, as disciples of Jesus Christ, are called to kiss the twisted lips of the world around us. You and I are called to offer assurance, acceptance, and hope. You and I are called, just as our Lord was called, to offer “a healing touch.”

And while it will be some time before we can literally touch, we can still offer our distanced touch, offering assurance, acceptance, and hope to the broken and battered of our world.

“A healing touch.” For now and evermore. Amen.

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- 1.) Tony Campolo, "Year of Jubilee," Preaching Today Tape #212.
 - 2.) Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace*, p. 173
 - 3.) Richard Selzer, *Moral Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*, pp.45-46