

June 27, 2021 Pentecost 5B

Mark 5:21-43

Skin Hunger

I learned a new phrase this week: "skin hunger." It was coined during COVID 19 and refers to what we missed by not being able to touch each other. Touch is a powerful thing.

One of the things that strikes me about the stories in chapter 5 of Mark's Gospel is the way Mark highlights the idea of touch.

Jesus has just arrived back in Galilee by boat and is immediately surrounded by people who need him. A man named Jairus, obviously important in his city and synagogue, runs to him, falls on his knees and begs for the life of his child. He says to Jesus, "Please come and **put your hands on her** so that she will be healed and live." Jesus does not hesitate. He leaves the crowds to go with this father in need. But as they walk quickly together through the growing crowd, a woman who had been sick for 12 years and spent all of her money trying to be cured approaches and **touches** Jesus' cloak. Not a big deal. He is surrounded by so many people that she is sure no one will notice; she is convinced that the touch will heal her, and it does. Simple enough.

What is unusual about this story is that Jesus makes such a big deal out of the touch. He stops and asks, "**Who touched my clothes?**" The disciples express amusement and surprise at His question because the crowd is so big and so many people are touching Jesus they think it will impossible to pick out just one. But He wants to identify her and give her a chance to express her faith.

The woman is afraid. Her particular sickness has made her unclean according the religious laws. And by touching Jesus, she has made Jesus, the most popular rabbi in town at this point, unclean! But Jesus calls her forth, assures her, and send her forth healed and at peace.

There was something in the woman's immense faith, a total conviction that after years of suffering, she had found the cure in the person of Jesus, and

the energy of that faith was more powerful than all the shoving and pulling of the crowd. One touch of utter faith is all it took.

And all this happens very quickly, while Jesus is rushing to meet another person's need. The power of Jesus is so intense and unbroken that it is like electricity: Jairus plugs into it and receives hope, and the woman plugs into it and receives healing. Nothing else matters and nothing interferes with Jesus' purpose. Fame does not distract him, physical exhaustion does not hinder him, and the clamoring of the crowd with its multitude of desires is shut out. Two people with specific needs have reached out to him and he knows that he can help them. He does.

In the following scene in the little girl's room, death has already arrived and the professional mourners have gathered. There is probably a great deal of discussion and questioning going on. Why is Jairus still bringing Jesus to the house when he has been informed that his child is dead? What good can the healer do now? Why doesn't he leave the man alone? Jairus needs to concentrate on his family now; the time for proper mourning has come.

But Jesus turns it all upside down, as He is known to do. He turns to the sad father and says the words that we all need to hear over and over again, "Do not fear. Only believe." So Jairus continues to lead him to his house, which is overflowing with crying neighbors. Jesus' words shock them. "The child is not dead but sleeping," He tells them. Instead of asking, "What does he know that we don't know about death?" they laugh at him. Mark tells us, "**He took her by the hand**" and spoke to her and life was restored. All by the power of touch.

COVID-19 has taken much from us. One of the things we missed during these 15+ months was the blessing of touch. We couldn't touch those who didn't live in our house. No handshakes, no hugs, no picking up the new – born grandchildren and holding them.

Skin Hunger. That hunger to feel the need of touching and being touched.

Think about the power of touch. Our skin is our largest organ. Here are some things science teaches us.

- Newborns that are given nurturing touch grow faster and have more improved mental and motor skill development.
- Children raised with more physical interaction tended to be less aggressive and violent.
- Partners who cuddle have been shown to have lower stress levels and blood pressure and improved immune function.
- Elderly people who receive the soothing, affirming experience of touch have been shown to better handle the process of aging and passing with dignity.

From the moment we are born to the final days of our lives, touch acts as a central aspect of the human experience — impacting our physical, mental and emotional health, and quite literally shaping the way we go through our lives.

Touch is our first sensation. The hand of a two-month-old human fetus will grasp when it feels something in its palm. A new-born baby will instinctively turn its head towards a touch on the cheek. All over the world, children play tag without having to learn how. The earliest forms of medicine drew on this human need to touch and be touched.

Aristotle considered touch the lowliest sense. He looked down on it because it was found in all animals and it relied on mere proximity, not the higher human faculties of thought, memory and imagination. But one could just as easily say that touch is the highest sense and for the same reasons. It is the basic animal instinct that lets us know we are alive in the world. It offers proof of the solidity of things other than ourselves.

In recent years the caring professions have revived this practice of healing through touch. The tender touch of others is now known to boost the immune system, lower blood pressure, decrease the level of stress hormones such as cortisol and trigger the release of the same kind of opiates as painkilling drugs. Premature babies gain weight when rubbed lightly from head to foot. Massages reduce pain in pregnant women. People with dementia who are hugged and stroked are less prone to irritability and depression.

In high school I suffered through Homer's *Odyssey*. When Odysseus was visiting Hades, he tried to hug his dead mother, Anticleia, so that they might "find a frigid comfort in shared tears". But Anticleia was a lifeless husk; she just slipped through his arms like smoke. Homer's metaphor for the unbridgeable chasm between the living and the dead – a failed hug – feels newly relevant in the time of COVID.

Touch is powerful. More powerful than we know. Think about this: God used "touch" as communication to connect with us and it changed the world. He sent his Son in the flesh—with hands to touch and skin to be touched. He stretched out His skin on the cross to reach through history and touch us with His love and grace.

Now He gives us to Himself in things that can be touched—the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper.

Skin Hunger. We know about it. We lived it. Now it is time to touch again and be touched. It is time to touch Jesus and to touch the Jesus in each other.

It is time for all of us to stand with the bleeding woman and hear Jesus say, "Who touched my clothes?" It is time to let Jesus take our hands as He did with Jairus' daughter and have life restored. And then he says to us, "Your faith has made you well, healed of the evil that swirls around you, free of the fear that stops you, released from the need to squander your energies in things that do not matter."

So, healed like the woman who had been sick for many years, brought to new life like the daughter of Jairus, we get up from our knees, and share that touch of Jesus with someone else.