

It is not unusual for the Gospel writer Mark to insert a story into a story. In our lesson this morning we will first hear a synagogue leader's urgent plea for Jesus to heal his gravely ill daughter. Jesus sets out for the man's house, but then a second event occurs when a woman touches the hem of Jesus' cloak. When Mark resumes telling of the child, she is now thought to have died before Jesus arrived. Some consider Mark uses such insertions for dramatic effect, which in this lesson will be the ultimate drama of having a child go from critically ill to clinically dead while Jesus took time to speak with a woman considered ritually unclean. The drama is evident, but what Mark invites us to do is to watch how the two stories interpret each other. [Craddock, Fred, Preaching Through the Christian Year B, (Trinity Press: Valley Forge, 1993) p. 328.]

There is a common thread within these two stories of ritual and purity. Many purity laws in the Jewish law were linked to cleanliness and health, though limited by lack of scientific knowledge. A woman has been hemorrhaging for twelve years, which kept her ritually unclean. As we know from the parable of the Good Samaritan, when a man is beaten and presumed dead, to touch him would make one ritually unclean. Thus it is with the child in our lesson.

Peter and I will share the two stories as a reading in parts. Let us hear what we might call two touching stories – two stories about touch – in our Gospel lesson in Mark 5:21-43.

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered around him; and he was by the sea.

Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw Jesus, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live."

So Jesus went with him. And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him.

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. 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." Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.

Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?"

And Jesus' disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?' " Jesus looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.

Jesus said to the woman, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the leader's house to say, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?"

But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe."

Jesus allowed no one to follow him except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. When they came to the house of the leader of the synagogue, he saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly.

When Jesus had entered, he said to them, "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping."

And they laughed at Jesus. Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was.

Jesus took her by the hand and said to her, "Talitha cum," which means, "Little girl, get up!"

And immediately the girl got up and began to walk about (she was twelve years of age). At this they were overcome with amazement. He strictly ordered them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

When our mission team travels to the Philippines, there will be times when they need to stand in line and go through customs. Customs is a means by which a government seeks to control what and sometimes who is allowed into a country. While thirty years ago, it might have been a game to seek if you could sneak something past customs without declaring or paying duty on them, today we are very conscious of not wanting to raise any suspicion when we travel.

One might wonder how far Jesus might have been able to travel if he had had to pass through customs each time he crossed between territories. Yet, in another sense, it is a pass through customs we find in our Gospel stories – not an inspect your suitcase customs, but an inspection of social custom and religious law and ritual. In both our stories, Jesus' actions make a declaration at the customs booth. What Jesus will open up for inspection in these two stories are ritual purity laws which define what and who is clean and unclean.

The first contact is Jairus, a Jewish synagogue leader, who begs Jesus to heal his critically ill daughter, but again, Jesus' response is delayed when he senses power had gone forth from him and asks who touched his clothing.

If I but touch... There are religious and cultural rituals of touching – the mezuzah at the doors of Jewish homes; putting one's fingers in baptismal water as a symbolic reminder of God's claim on our lives; a sacred stone or wall which is kissed; the touch of a healing hand.

If I but touch... While we are careful not to glorify any person, is there still not a certain sense of wonder in touching the famous? Often this is turned around and expressed not as "I touched him or her," but "He or she touched me." Today one posts on face book if you catch a glimpse of a rock star or movie star, an athlete or famous leader, but the report is all the more powerful if there has been a touch. I think the power of touch may simply being in the presence of one like Pope Francis, or the Dalai Lama, or how it would have been to sit with Martin Luther King, Jr., or Mahatmas Gandhi.

If I but touch... I have a sense each of us may share the woman's desire to touch or be touched, either within the anonymity of a crowd, or perhaps the privacy of a confessional. We share the hope of what could happen if we might be able to touch Jesus' hem, or hear a voice that will bring freedom from a mental illness or healing for a physical ailment; or bring an answer to a struggle with which we have dealt for years; or simply remove the memory of a certain day or incident. I expect there is something each of us would like to have replaced or removed, healed or revealed. "If I but touch the hem of his garment, I will be made well."

The woman was made well. She felt her hemorrhage cease immediately. She felt healing in her body. The touch worked. I picture her bringing her reaching out hand back, and placing it over her mouth to mute her gasp of incredible joy, as the built-up tears of a dozen years begin to flow.

We know how the story continues. Jesus turns, asks who touched his cloak, and the woman, for whom the last thing desired was to be found out, came forward, and told him the whole truth.

Mark does not intend for us to count the minutes of the dialogue between Jesus and the woman, but within this time, the horrible message comes from the synagogue leader's house. His twelve year old daughter has died – the girl, born the same year the woman began hemorrhaging, is dead. No one asks, but I certainly wonder why Jesus couldn't have let the woman go.

It seems, in the end, all turns out well. Jesus encourages the father to believe. The girl is healed in the presence of her parents and three chosen disciples. Everyone is amazed. Jesus doesn't say, "I told you so," but "Give the girl something to eat" – the happy ending to what could have been a tragic story.

The happy ending may cause us to forget Jesus is violating Jewish customs. An ill child could be touched and healed; but when she died, Jewish law declared anyone touching her would be themselves defiled. We now recognize Mark's link in the two stories is Jesus' customs' declaration about what is clean and what is unclean – in those days these were blood and death issues.

Of course, what gets Jesus in trouble is not his going through customs and opening his bags for examination, but his assuming he is the director of homeland security. By his authority, granted by God, Jesus is now the one declaring to the religious customs inspectors, the ritual and tradition keepers, and the purity watchers, that he will make the decision as to what is clean and who is acceptable.

In Mark's gospel, "Jesus blesses without partiality, Jew and Gentile, near and far, clean and unclean." [Craddock, *op. cit.*] Jesus declares those things over which people have neither control nor choice cannot be declared sinful or unclean. Jesus declares this to the woman, and the family and friends of the child, and by extension to us as his Church.

In reading these two stories, we find one about a woman who was able reach out her own hand to touch Jesus, and the other about a girl who needed Jesus to touch her. One touched, and the other was touched.

Jesus knew the woman's touch would make him ritually unclean. One could imagine a different reaction from him, in which he declares, "My God, woman, why did you have to touch me? I have things to do and now you have made me unclean. Why couldn't you have simply cried for help from a distance?"

Yet, as one has written, "Instead of admonishing her outrageous trespass, Jesus praises her faith. Instead of justifiable anger, Jesus bids her go in peace" [and wholeness.] [Lindvall, Michael, in *Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 3*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2008), p. 192]

Jesus, in turning to the woman, returns her touch. He does not address her as unclean, much less as sinner. Jesus calls her daughter – and daughters are beloved. Jesus tells this woman she is just as beloved as a synagogue leader's twelve year old daughter.

For the woman, there was more to healing than just the cessation of a blood flow; there came the words of Jesus, which welcomed her in faith. So too, Jairus' daughter receives not only breath back into her body, but Jesus' request to give her food marks her restoration to full life.

There are times in our lives when we are able to reach out, seeking to touch, and there are other times when we need others, intercessors to invite the touch of Jesus for us – not just at times of disease, death or grief, but when we might be in the depth of depression, the snare of addiction, or even the dead-end of cynicism – times when our arms seem frozen at our sides, and we are unable to reach out ourselves.

There are those, perhaps among us this day, who are silently reaching out, believing in the "If I but touch..." power of Jesus' gospel good news. There are those, perhaps not among us this day, who are in such depths of despair that we are needed to intercede on their behalf in prayer and advocacy.

In two weeks, our Philippines mission team will enter a country with different customs and economy. They will take with them an American belief that security is more often found in financial well-being than relationships. They will be confronted with poverty, and perhaps tempted to notice the people's happiness, and comment on the happy poor. Yet, with Jesus walking with them, and within the trip's theme of "Less is More," each will be challenged to look at how financial security may actually be a barrier to happiness and relationship.

The good news we are offered, and we have to offer, is that Jesus is the chief customs inspector for all. Where there is confessed sin, there is promised forgiveness. When a societal custom or religious rule has declared something sinful or unclean, Jesus changes the declaration to that of restored grace. For Jesus, the rights of persons trumped the rules of purity.

We are now entrusted to carry on the inspection of customs, but not according to our rules of tradition, or outdated mores, or long-standing biases; no, we stand under the rules of Jesus which favored being free over being bound. Let us be guided by the knowledge that:

Jesus did not just heal, he made whole;

Jesus did not just bring back breath, he gave life;

Jesus did not just invite a woman into faith, he welcomed home a daughter.