

## **I Know It's a Touchy Subject....**

[Text - Mark 5:21-43]

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This morning's New Testament reading begins with Jesus crossing the Sea of Galilee and encountering a large and enthusiastic crowd. It's the perfect set-up for a powerful preaching opportunity, but that's not what happens. Jesus is immediately approached by a leader of the local synagogue, who falls at his feet and begs him: "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 puts-aside that wonderful opportunity to preach the Word, and immediately goes with him.

As the *Incarnate* Word - as the flesh-and-blood Expression of Divine Love and Grace - Jesus always makes himself accessible to people in need. He doesn't allow himself to be controlled by the pressure of a big crowd, or by the constraints of big-time religious traditions. As the Living, Loving Word, Jesus is willing to reinterpret, or even dismiss, the Written Word of Hebrew Scripture - which brings him all kinds of grief from the religious authorities; but also brings tremendous relief to people who are oppressed, or ignored, or in dire need of genuine hope and help.

As Jesus heads toward Jarius' home, the crowd follows, pressing-in around him. And in that crowd, there's a woman who reaches-out to touch Jesus' robe. He suddenly stops and asks, "Who touched me?" which is a pretty strange question, in the middle of a moving, jostling crowd. Yet Jesus is aware that a specific person has connected with him, and that a discernable energy has passed between them. Apparently, as a completely open and accessible instrument of Divine Compassion and Wholeness, Jesus has a sensitive awareness of each person he encounters.

And in this particular instance, that sensitivity and awareness proves to be tremendously important.

The person who touches him is a woman who has “endured much under many physicians” and for the past twelve years has gotten worse instead of better. Her bleeding would make her an “unclean, untouchable” individual, according to Jewish Levitical Law. She has an embarrassing, debilitating condition; and she’s run out of money, run out of doctors, and run out of options. [I guess the Hebrew High Court failed to uphold Healthcare subsidies!] And unlike Jairus, a male leader of the local synagogue, who can openly ask for help, this shunned woman has to quietly blend into the crowd, and hope to get close enough to touch Jesus’ robe. So she comes-up behind him, touches his robe, and immediately her bleeding stops.

She can feel within herself that she’s been healed; and Jesus feels within himself a release of healing energy. When he asks, “Who touched me?” she humbly admits that it was she. She *had* touched Jesus’ robe; but she also touches his heart, with her remarkable courage and faith. So Jesus gives her a beautiful, Life-affirming compliment. “Daughter, *your* faith has made you well! Now, go in peace and be made whole!” What a wonderful affirmation, for someone who has been disregarded and demoralized for so many years! And what a wonderful example, for those of us who would seek to be instruments of Divine compassion and healing today.

You and I, obviously, have no control over whether people’s health or lives will be restored when we reach-out to help them. Nevertheless, we can still be an important part of their healing process, simply by our willingness to stand beside them, or to stand-up for them. Jesus’ call, to heal the sick and free the oppressed, remains extremely relevant for you and me today. I bring this up, because all around us, there are people who are [metaphorically] bleeding and scarred, from being battered and

beaten by legalistic interpretations of *our* Bible! And I'm not talking about the laws against eating pork or shellfish or buzzards; or that prohibit touching dead crocodiles, chameleons, or geckos. Because while those laws are right there in Leviticus Chapter 11, even the most adamant fundamentalist will admit that *they* are completely archaic and irrelevant. However...that *one* reference to same-gender sex, is the brutal battering-ram that's still being used to beat-down and belittle LGBT people today. Our High Court may have spoken on the issue of the right to marry, but the Religious Right continues to speak words of blatant bigotry and categorical condemnation.

And although all those various skin rashes [or "leprosy"] of Leviticus no longer carry a harsh social stigma, those people who carry within them HIV or AIDS are still being treated as "lepers" by far too many self-righteous people. And while you and I may not be able to offer a cure for the condition, we can certainly offer compassion and care to the person. Whenever you and I, like Jesus, look beyond the faceless crowd and see that individual person reaching-out for help - and are willing to be touched, and to touch - then the power of Divine healing once again begins to flourish!

Sensitivity, compassion, and openness are crucial qualities for carrying forward the work of Divine healing today. And these are the same qualities that this congregation displayed 24 years ago, when it made the decision to declare itself "Open and Affirming". On June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1991, Brecksville United Church of Christ officially proclaimed that this is a community of faith which "Invites, welcomes, and affirms all people, including those of every race, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital circumstance, physical or psychological ability, economic condition, ethnic origin and theological tradition." [I think we pretty well covered all the bases!] This declaration clearly proclaims that this Family of Faith is willing to embrace and support all those who religion and society

far too often consider substandard human beings. And with our open affirmation, we not only offer renewed hope to people; we can even help bring-about new Life!

Before Jesus arrives at Jairus' house, he receives word that he is too late - that Jairus' daughter is already dead. But Jesus doesn't heed that word. Instead he proclaims a Divine Word of hope and faith: "Do not fear, only believe!" Then he enters that house and takes the hand of the presumably dead child [which *also* violates Levitical Law!] And Jesus raises that child to new life and renewed health. That's an extraordinary demonstration of Divine compassion and power; yet, as we know, that's not how the story always goes. Sometimes we pray for our children, and they don't get better. Sometimes we beg God to save our loved ones, yet they still struggle, and suffer, and die. And like those mourners outside Jairus' house, we may begin to scoff at the idea of any Sacred Intervention; or question whether our faith is really good for anything. That's why Jesus once again says to you and me today, "Do not fear, only believe - for all will be well!"

Sometimes, Life is extremely painful and confusing, depressing and devastating. Even when you're trying to do your absolute best for others, you can still end-up being thwarted, betrayed, rejected, or even nailed to a cross! But that doesn't mean that your effort is wrong, or your faith is weak, or that your Holy Source has abandoned you. And it certainly doesn't mean that Life's Story ends with crucifixion and death. The ultimate Good News - our ultimate healing - arises from that Eternal Touch between our frail and fleeting earthy lives, and that awesome and glorious Resurrected Life, revealed in Jesus Christ:

The One who willingly reaches-out to touch *all* people with compassion, healing, and grace;

The One who is with us right now, inspiring us to continue his mission of peace and wholeness;

The One who replaces religious legalism, with Divine openness and welcome;

The One who raises-up that One Law in the book of Leviticus worth quoting: "You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself."  
When we get *that* one right, then everything else is just icing on the [gay wedding] cake!