

Healing Touch

Mark 5:21-43 by Patty Friesen (Mar.1/15)

Our healing story in Mark is full of physicality – prayers on knees, bleeding, and dying bodies and lots of touch with two unclean females. These two females are opposites in every way. The 12 year old girl has been the privileged daughter of the ruling class. The sick woman has spent her last 12 years in misery and illness. Jairus makes an assertive approach to Jesus about his daughter, as befits his male social status as leader of the synagogue. The sick woman is ashamed and shyly reaches through the crowd, from behind Jesus. She doesn't belong to anyone and has no rich father to advocate for her healing. She spent all she had on doctors, yet instead of getting better, she got worse!

As a result of her incurable illness, she was considered unclean and shouldn't have been in the crowd at all, let alone touching Jesus. Yet despite everyone else touching him in the crowd, Jesus knows that this is a special touch, made out of desperation. Jesus doesn't become unclean by unclean people touching him. The power goes the other way, out of Jesus, healing her and making her clean. Like Jairus, she falls at Jesus' feet, and tells everyone why she touched him and that she had been instantly healed. "My daughter," proclaims Jesus – becoming her father and advocate, "Your faith has saved you, go in peace." Not only is her health restored, but Jesus takes her under his wing as a protector.

But this delay has caused the original mission to Jairus' daughter to fail and a messenger announces that she has died but Jesus says, "Do not fear; only believe (like the bleeding woman) and she will be healed." Jesus takes his inner healing circle of Peter,

James and John with him through the derisive crowd to complete his mission. He also calls her his child and takes her by the hand. Again, dead bodies were considered unclean but Jesus isn't afraid of touching unclean things. His power makes them clean. Her spirit returned to her body and at once she stood up. Then Jesus told them to give her something to eat to prove she was alive, even as he himself ate fish after the resurrection to prove to his disciples that he lived.

Healing is the major role in Jesus' ministry in Mark's gospel, providing the framework for Jesus' preaching. We today are in as much need of healing as the crowds who confronted Jesus. 90% of our prayer requests in church are for healing so we still believe and trust in Jesus the healer even when we do not always experience miracles or healings in the same dramatic way as the gospels. What we learn from today's Gospel lesson is that #1 - Jesus always desires to heal us and is the source of our healing. As God's agent of healing in the Gospels, Jesus goes out of his way to respond to the lowliest, whomever reaches out to touch him. Jesus doesn't even require that we have faith before we are healed. Out of the 36 healing stories in the Gospels, only six people actually had faith that they would be healed. The point is Jesus' faith, love and healing power, not our faith.

#2 – God calls for our participation in healing. In Mark 3, Jesus sends out his disciples, giving them authority over demons and to cure diseases. Jesus had every confidence that his disciples could heal. Many of the healings in the Gospels do not directly involve the sick person themselves but someone else, friends, family or employers who come to Jesus to intercede on behalf of the sick. We are the ones who request healing, who bear our loved ones to Jesus and who give them something to eat

after they are made well. We are the ones who are called to be the Physician's assistants and God hands each one of us a physician's bag for our work. This PA's bag doesn't have a stethoscope or blood pressure cuff or pills. This bag has the healing tools of prayer, theology, touch, music, scripture, rituals, and community life.

Tool #1 - Prayer - Our job as Christians is to always surround each other and pray for healing. In doing so, we name Jesus' work in the world as healing that involves the whole person – physical and spiritual – recovery from ailments and the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation - the release from fear, anger and resentments. Bones may break but so do hearts and often it is the spiritual work of healing – restoration of hope and relationships that becomes more evident than actual cures for our physical illnesses.

In fact, despite our prayers, physical healing and complete recovery often doesn't happen. When the worship committee was planning this series on healing, we asked nurse Naomi Schellenberg about her work with healing. She said, "In healthcare, we aren't actually healing people, we are just helping them cope." That's profound. Maybe coping is more realistic than miraculous cures. It makes me think that we should have renamed our series, Coping. Friends that help us cope. Touch that helps us cope. Prayer that helps us cope.

This idea of coping fits #2 tool - our Anabaptist theology. Our Anabaptist heritage of suffering teaches us that we cannot avoid suffering and that we shouldn't try to avoid it but that God is present with us in suffering, in our bodies and minds. This is important in a culture that believes there must be something wrong with you – you must be doing something wrong or not doing enough if you are always sick or depressed. As Anabaptists, we believe sickness, disasters, and bad things just happen – not because we

are bad people or because we don't have enough faith. Illness is not necessarily the cause of anything other than nature or genetics taking its course in the world. We accept illness and hurt as a part of life – therefore we are not bound by it or defined by it. We are free from the burden of being OK all the time. That is healing in itself!

Tool #3 - Touch. Despite the germiness of handshakes on Sunday morning – I believe that touch is an important connection and I shake hands like crazy – mostly to warm up my freezing hands. One of the most important part of Sunday morning presentations at the Mennonite Nursing Home are the handshakes after worship and you will not find germier handshakes than at the Nursing Home but they are an essential part of connection and affirmation for elders and for ourselves. When Tony, Jackie and I are at the nursing home next Sunday, we'll shake lots of hands and then we will use Isogel all the way home.

Tools 4 and 5 – Scripture and Music. Scripture is an important tool for coping: the healing stories in the gospels, and the psalms give voice to our experiences of illness, anger and hope. We learn and memorize these passages and the Lord's Prayer that they can give us comfort in our hospital beds. Music is powerful medicine. Our music Sundays here at church before Christmas and the Saskatune Singers and Rosthern Junior College Chorale were like a shot of morphine this winter – they lift us up and move us along in our faith. Music is the best pain relief, the best high we can get in church.

Tool #6 - Rituals - We have the ritual of Sunday worship and practice Sabbath – taking breaks from our work to be with family and relax and rest our bodies and minds. We have the ritual of Christ's healing in communion. We have the ritual of receiving

anointing of oil for healing and the forgiveness of sins, which we will offer on Palm Sunday.

Finally, Tool #7 - At church we have the healing/coping tools of community – breaking down barriers between young and old, sick and well, women and men, single and married, gay and straight, parents and non-parents. Church is a place for practicing barrier breaking and reconciliation. In Zimbabwe, they greet each other, “I am well, if you are well.” We are well together. Sometimes church raises our blood pressure and sometimes church is an unhealthy place to be but ideally church is also a place where we can be well together, where we share burdens and joys, play together, work together and laugh together for laughter is the best medicine.

In community, we encourage healthy lifestyles and healthy bodies – in eating locally and eating healthy, drinking in moderation and exercising. It is a powerful Christian testimony to be taking care of our bodies and spirits in the best ways possible. Studies show that religious people are healthier and live longer due to our lifestyle choices. Regular church attenders give four times as much to charity and volunteer twice as much as their secular neighbors. Programs that include a spiritual dimension in alcohol and drug addiction have a better success rate than their secular counterparts. As Joseph Califano, former secretary of the Department of Health observed, “Every individual I have met who successfully came off drugs or alcohol has given religion as the key to rehabilitation.”

As Christians we have powerful healing and coping tools within our faith and practice for ourselves and to offer people around us. Let us pray using the prayer for healing sheet in our bulletin or the back of our hymnals.