

A HEALING TOUCH



Scripture:

Psalm 30

¹I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me. ²O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. ³O LORD, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.

⁴Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones, and give thanks to his holy name. ⁵For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

⁶As for me, I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved." ⁷By your favor, O LORD, you had established me as a strong mountain; you hid your face; I was dismayed.

⁸To you, O LORD, I cried, and to the LORD I made supplication: ⁹"What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?" ¹⁰Hear, O LORD, and be gracious to me! O LORD, be my helper!"

¹¹You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, ¹²so that my soul may praise you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

Mark 1: 40-45

⁴⁰A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean."

⁴¹Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" ⁴²Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. ⁴³After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, ⁴⁴saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." ⁴⁵But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



The Rev. Daniel Christian was our guest preacher. Rev. Christian is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church USA. He has served churches in Washington D.C. and San Rafael. He was Moderator and Vice Moderator of Presbytery of the Redwoods. He is a graduate of San Francisco Theological Seminary and is now the Director of Development with Alumni and Church Relations at SFTS.

THE POWER OF TOUCH

As I was writing my sermon on “the healing touch,” I looked up an old favorite book of mine by Diane Ackerman called *A Natural History of the Senses*. She talks in great scientific and politic detail about all of our human senses. Then she gets to the point where she talks about human touch.

She says, “Our skin is what stands between us and the world. If you think about it, no other part of us makes contact with something. It’s our skin that makes contact, but our bones don’t. No other part of us makes contact. We experience the world through the touch of our skin. Our skin imprisons us, but it also gives us individual shape; it protects us from invaders, cools us down or heats us up as need be, it produces vitamin D, it holds in our body fluids. Most amazing, perhaps, is that it can mend itself when necessary, and it is constantly renewing itself. Our skin weighs between six and ten pounds and it’s the largest organ of the body. Although for some of us it may sag or cascade or roam as we grow older. For many cultures, it’s the ideal canvas to decorate with paints or tattoos, or adorn with jewelry. But, most of all, it harbors the sense of touch.” (Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*)

The power of human touch is how we experience the world. I think it is safe to say that our most important sense of all of them is our sense of touch!

THE MAN WITH LEPROSY

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus touches the man with leprosy. Prior to this passage, Jesus is in Capernaum and he is healing the sick and the demon possessed. The entire city gathers around him to witness this.

By the time Jesus encounters this man with leprosy, he has already started to heal some people. Jesus lays eyes on this man and he is absolutely “moved with pity.” The sight and the condition of this man must have been shocking; more than shocking, it must have been horrible to look at him! I can’t imagine just how this leprosy man would have lived in the world. Wherever he walked, people would have crossed the street, turned around, screamed, cried; they would have spat at him, they would have cursed him.

MARASMUS

I came across a word, and it is called marasmus. Marasmus is something that often happens in orphanages where there are lots of children and not enough care. It also happens in places where elderly people who need a lot of care go sometimes. Marasmus is a natural withering of the skin due to lack of human touch. Our skin withers when we don’t get enough human touch.

THE HEALING TOUCH OF JESUS

This passage from Mark is dramatic and it creates a great tension. By touching this man, it sets in motion the life saving and controversial ministry of Jesus.

Jesus ministry is controversial because something happens here. He touches this man who society has avoided and rejected and he recognizes him and the hand of God touches this diseased man who has been isolated and rejected.

I can’t begin to imagine the last time this man was ever touched by another human being. Was it days, weeks, months, years perhaps? How long had he gone without ever being touched by another human being?

The healing touch of Christ comes in and it shines the light of God into the darkness of sickness and brings in the light of God and health and healing. Mark’s gospel makes us confront the questions: Can the healing touch of faith, rooted in the holiness of God, the creator of heaven and earth, heal us when our body is sick or broken? Can the touch of faith heal us when our mind is not well? Can our faith heal us when our emotions have been damaged?

HEALING TOUCH FOR ALL PEOPLE

By healing the leprosy man, Mark’s gospel is telling readers that the healing touch of Christ is extended to all people. Not some people some of the time, it’s all people all of the time. This love is extended no matter where we come from, how much money we make, or who we love. The healing hands of Christ reach out to touch all of us.

Mark's gospel can be understood pretty simply in this way: It is about social outsiders who get in and insiders who are pushed out.

And it is about: "Does God help those who help themselves?" No. God helps those who cannot help themselves. Outsiders get in, insiders are out and God helps those who cannot help themselves. There you have it. I'm done! I'm finished; I'm done! That's it! Now you have Mark's gospel right there. So I know you are doing your Bible study, so there you have Mark's gospel.

To touch and heal the weak and social outsiders, we see Jesus touch this leprous man. What this text does is invite all of us to be that leprous man, to be the one in need of being touched by the hand of God so that we, too, can be made whole again

MARY BODILY

You had a long time member here; her name was Mary Bodily. I remember Mary. We were at seminary together. I don't know if she remembered me, but I remember her. She was a very outspoken, dedicated person on bringing the love of Christ to people who were on the outside, people who had disabilities, so that they could be included and brought to the inside.

I was so struck when I came here for Mary's funeral and listened to all these people give testimonies to how her fighting opened doors to those living with disabilities. It was truly, truly amazing, learning about someone in your congregation. She was doing the work of Christ! Truly, truly a beautiful witness, and I was honored to know her and honored to know that she was also part of this great congregation and that you welcomed me here.

HEALING MIRACLES

Healing miracles in Mark's gospel are not "some form of special magic," they are not

something that only good people get and bad people don't. By linking the leprous man to the healing love of Jesus, we see a willingness on behalf of the man to approach Jesus. Jesus doesn't run down the street after him saying, hey, let me heal you. To the contrary, the leprous man walks to him and kneels at his feet. This is an important piece theologically. The walking and the kneeling were done by him.

THE PARTING OF THE RED SEA

In the book of Exodus, we know the story of the parting of the Red Sea, or we've all seen the Ten Commandments. The Israelites are fleeing. Pharaoh is coming after them. The Israelites are backed up against the Red Sea, and here comes Pharaoh. He is now going to slaughter all the Israelites. What are they going to do? The Red Sea doesn't part. What happens is people have to start wading into the water first, up to their necks, crying out to God in the water. And only then, when they have waded into the water up to their necks and over their heads, only then the waters part.

OVERCOMING BOUNDARIES

Imagine the social boundaries and barriers that this leprous man had to overcome to approach Jesus. Think about that for a minute. Think how nervous we get when we want to talk to someone. He had a lot to overcome.

What boundaries keep us separated from God? What holds us back? Is it our anger, is it some self loathing, is it parts of our ego, is it a fear about the future, is it regretting the past, is it worry about our health? What are the things that block us from living fully into this present and loving the generous God revealed in Christ?

THE WAY

There is a movie that came out a couple of years ago, and it's called *The Way*, and it has Martin Sheen in it. It was directed by his son. The Martin Sheen character has learned that his son has died and his son was taking a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella in Spain. He started the pilgrimage and then died tragically. He goes to pick up his sons ashes and he is going to fly home, but he decides that he is not going to do that. Instead he decides

that he is going to do the whole pilgrimage with his son's ashes. So he sets out to walk the 780 kilometers from northern Spain to the cathedral of Santiago De Compostella, where St. James' bones are believed to be buried. For over a thousand years pilgrims continue to take this journey.

Along the pilgrimage road, the Martin Sheen character is scattering the ashes of his son at every step of the way. So what is happening is that he is being made whole in his grief by walking this most ancient pilgrimage that thousands and thousands and thousands of people have walked before him. By taking this walk, he walks into the very arms of God.

ENCOUNTERING WHAT IS HOLY

When we can push aside whatever it is that blocks us, when we can push through a crowd of obstacles that we have in our own life, we can encounter what is Holy. It is that encounter with what is Holy where we meet a healing and undeniable presence of God.

If we can encounter this undeniable presence of God in our joy or in our sorrow, this is a call to all of us to push aside the wounds that block our souls from healing. If you are holding on to something that blocks you, rest your hands in Christ's hands and ask to be made well. If you have a crutch that prevents you from understanding and experiencing the healing power of God, put it down. Only when we push through those hurts and obstacles and kneel at the feet of Christ can we meet the undeniable presence of God. Our cries will be heard, and our lives can be healed and made whole

Yesterday I was at a Presbytery meeting in Stockton. I know you are jealous; I know, I know. I got up at 5:00 a.m. to be there. During the worship we did a special ceremony. We had been given a piece of purple cloth. Then the preacher gave a sermon about the curtain being torn open in Mark's gospel. So there was a tearing that we all had to do with our purple cloth.

We were going to tear what it was that was holding us back. So it was a very symbolic moment of ripping of the cloth. And it is only when we can rip that cloth, when we can push aside, when we can be like the leprous man that we can fall to the feet of Christ. Only then, like the Israelites wading into the water, when we can do that, we are taking those first steps to say, Jesus, Messiah, Son of God, heal me, too. Heal me, too. This is the touch of God, and touch is the most important sense we have. We need it to live. And that is enough today.

**MY FRIENDS, MAY IT BE SO FOR ALL
OF YOU AND ALSO VERY MUCH FOR ME.
AMEN**



**Rev. Daniel Christian
Presbyterian Church of the Roses
2500 Patio Court
Santa Rosa, CA 95405
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