

OK, here's my nod to the Fourth of July. These are answers given on a 6th grade American history test: Delegates from the original 13 states formed the COMPLIMENTAL Congress. Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin were two SINGERS of the Declaration of Independence. Benjamin Franklin discovered electricity by rubbing two cats backwards. Thomas Jefferson said, "A horse divided against itself cannot stand." Benjamin Franklin died in 1790 and is still dead. (DYNAMIC PREACHING, July-Sept 2006)

First some background. Once again we find Jesus close to the sea. This is not accidental. It is His place of teaching. Crowds gather and He casts out HIS net, as He is doing the same that he commissioned His disciples – and us – to do – to fish for men and women. But earlier Mark's gospel told us that Jesus teaches with authority (Mk 1:27). His words become deeds, and His deeds are embodied words. What He says indicates how He acts, and how He acts illustrates what He says. He is a unity of word and deed, so the sudden appearance of a leader of the synagogue is not an interruption. What Jesus was teaching will now take the form of a symbolic story. As the story unfolds, the teaching will gradually deepen and become more complex.

Jairus is uncharacteristic of synagogue leaders. Synagogue leaders in the gospels do not beseech Jesus. They stand and watch disapprovingly. They plot against Him and accuse Jesus of being a lawbreaker because He works on the Sabbath or as unclean because of His contact with people who have transgressed the purity codes. But Jairus is a suppliant, begging Jesus repeatedly. The story does not tell us how this synagogue leader broke ranks, how he came to find himself at the feet of Jesus. But the implication is that his dying daughter has made him desperate. There is nothing wrong with desperation – how often in our own lives do we get our values realigned when we get desperate – remembering because of our desperation that we are not in charge of our lives, but they are ultimately and completely in the hands of God?

Jairus' request acknowledges that God is working through Jesus. He wants his daughter to live by the divine life that can come through Jesus' hands. But divine love is not communicated by simply being physically touched by Jesus – and healing is more than recovery from illness. A suffering woman carries this deeper teaching, a suffering woman whom Jesus and Jairus meet on their way.

And so, second, the hemorrhaging woman. We are reminded of the limits of physical contact. On one level, physicians who use physical strategies to effect physical cures have not been able to help this woman. In fact, they have made things worse, adding financial collapse to physical sickness. On a more important level, the crowd is pressing on Jesus. Physical contact is constant. But just physically touching Jesus does not lead to receiving divine love. When Jesus asks, "Who has touched me?" He does not mean it in the physical sense of skin against skin. His disciples take it in this strictly physical sense. But this type of touching, just bumping against Jesus, is not spiritually significant.

The woman touches Jesus in a different way. She has heard about Jesus. We are not told what she heard, but she has obviously heard enough to develop an appropriate interior disposition. She has a cooperating consciousness, one that is able to receive the flow of divine power. This consciousness does not stress physical touch as if skin on skin contact produces healing. She knows that all she has to do is touch His cloak, just come into minimal contact with Him. The spiritual love is coming through Jesus, and so some contact is necessary. But it is spiritual love, and so her interior openness to divine love is what is important. Jesus' desire to manifest divine, compassionate love is matched by her readiness to receive it.

Both Jesus and the woman know something has happened. Saving power has gone out and saving power has been taken in. And they know it immediately. It happened on a deep level, deeper than the mind can initially perceive. The woman approaches Jesus with ‘fear and trembling’ – fear and trembling is the traditional set of feelings and thoughts that accompany an encounter with the divine. What is the central question of Mark’s gospel? We keep coming back to it throughout – “Who is this?” Ah, Jesus is God, the story is telling us once again.

Jesus spells out what has happened. She has *never* been an unclean woman with uncontrolled bleeding, despite what the law may have said. She has *always* been a daughter of God, a daughter who is suffering. She held onto that deep spiritual identity, and that deeper identity gave her courage to reach for God’s love as it was manifesting itself in Jesus. God’s love is for God’s children, and she is one of God’s children. That is her faith. And the healing that comes from that faith is more than physical. She can go in peace and enter back into the community. Since she has been spiritually touched by God, she can physically touch and be touched by others. She is re-included into interpersonal and community living.

Jairus asked that Jesus lays hands on his DAUGHTER (v. 23). By ‘daughter’ he meant his biological offspring. However, to the ears of Jesus he was pointing to a daughter of God who was being threatened by physical death. Jesus immediately went with him for the love of the Father is always with His children, with us. If we know and believe this, our consciousness cooperates, and the spiritual love enters the physical and social realms of healing. When we operate knowing that we are the beloved sons and daughters of God, we operate from a deep place of truth – and our whole stance toward life is changed – and all others in the world, for we recognize them too as sons and daughters of God. No exceptions.

But the teaching is not over yet. In Biblical thought, God owns blood. So God’s love, working through Jesus, has stopped the flow of blood in the hemorrhaging woman and started the flow of blood in the 12-year-old girl. Divine love is geared to specific human situations and designed to bring them to betterment. But we also know that everyone that Jesus healed or brought back to life eventually died. These stories may reveal God’s concern about improving the quality of life (stopping hemorrhaging) and reversing untimely death (the death of a child). But their full importance lies elsewhere. Since God created human physical life, divine activity could continue to create it. But this is not a mechanical process. Human consciousness is involved in complex and baffling ways. These stories give a glimpse of the necessary interior dispositions. We all know from experience that many of our prayers for healing do not get answered as we wish. But the interior disposition, if it is aligned with God’s ways not being our ways, will surrender to a plan we often cannot grasp or appreciate. We believe that God wills what is good, even when we don’t like it or understand it.

Third, so what about us? In terms of using our 5 senses as ways of spiritual knowing, touch probably comes in third. We say, ‘We see God,’ and ‘We hear God,’ on a somewhat regular basis. Eyes and ears are what Jesus tries to open so that the spiritual might be perceived. These are the most used analogies. Smell and taste are the least used. While we may ‘taste and see that the Lord is good,’ as Psalm 34 prays, and claim there is a ‘fragrance’ to holiness, the nose and the tongue are not highly frequented analogies. Touch is in the middle, after sight and sound, and before taste and smell.

But there is a quality about touching that makes it a perfect sense for experiencing the spirit. Rachel Naomi Remen, a physician who works on humanizing the world of medicine, tells a story that gets to the core of healing touch, and Jesus’ activity in this gospel story. Remen does workshops with other physicians and, at one point, has them touch one another with healing intent. It is always a moving exercise as the doctors reclaim aspects of themselves and others with which they have, to continue the metaphor, ‘lost touch.’

One man described his experience this way: *At first I thought I would just play it safe, but after Jane (his partner in the exercise) told me about the pain she usually has in her back I decided to take a chance and tell her about my divorce. How hard it had become for me to trust women. She asked me where I felt this pain, and I touched my heart. She nodded.....Then Jane put the palm of her hand on my chest. It was really astonished by how warm her hand was, and gently and tenderly she touched me. A little at a time the warmth of her hand seemed to penetrate my chest and surround my heart. I had a strange sort of experience. For a while there, it seemed to me as if she were holding my heart in her hand rather than just touching my chest. That's when I felt the strength of her hand, how rock-steady she was, and in a funny way I could feel that she was really THERE for my pain, committed to being there, and suddenly I was not alone. I was safe. And I started to cry.* (Remen, KITCHEN TABLE WISDOM, p. 240)

The temptation of this man at the start of the experience, to play it safe and not tell his touching partners, is a universal human tendency. We want to always look like we have it all together. And so we often keep our pain to ourselves, isolating ourselves from the human companionship that we need so desperately.

In the same book Remen tells a story she calls "Kissing the Boo-Boo." Jessie had suffered a temporary bowel obstruction from adhesions that had been caused by the radiation used to treat her cancer. When the pain began, she packed a small overnight bag and drove herself 25 miles to the hospital. She had to pull over several times to vomit. Then, she spent one full day in the emergency room. When Rachel asked her why she did not call any of her friends, she said they were all working and besides, *'None of my friends knows a thing about intestinal obstruction.'* *'Then why didn't you call me?'* *'Well, it's not really your field either,' she replied. 'Jessie,' I said, 'even children instinctively run to others when they fall down.'* *With a great deal of heat she said, 'Yes, I've never understood that. It's so silly. Kissing the boo-boo doesn't help the pain at all.'* *I was stunned. 'Jessie,' I said, 'it doesn't help the pain, it helps the loneliness.'* (Ibid., p. 59-60)

Pain and loneliness are often companions. When we see another person in pain, it can increase the sense of distance, even if the seeing is compassionate. When we listen to another person in pain, they can be comforted because their words are being received. But touching seems to be special. It has the capacity to bridge the separateness and create a non-abandoning sense of presence. In the story of the woman who touched the man's chest, the touching woman seemed to reach through the man's skin and actually hold his heart with such a rock-steady sense that he knew he was not alone – and that he was safe. From a theological point of view, if this is what was communicated, then the touching person had become a vehicle for divine love. In some cases the flow of divine love may cure. Physical maladies may become better. But whether it *physically* cures or not, human touch that communicates divine care and inclusion always *heals*. The isolated person is no longer alone and, somehow feels unexplainably safe. In biblical terms, they are saved, whether physically healed or not. In a world so full of brokenness and hurt, we can be agents of this healing touch, as was Jesus. May we be ministers of such healing touch to our families, our church, and our world. Let the church say amen. (entire homily adapted from John Shea, EATING WITH THE BRIDEGROOM, p. 161-168)