

Mark 1:29-39
February 7, 2021

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen.

At the sound of the pager, I rushed toward the Emergency Room wondering what I might find. Outside the room a nurse advised me the patient was an elderly woman dealing with heart failure. She was alone. Family not yet present. In order to alleviate her symptoms the medical team was trying to intubate her so as to get her airway open; however, she was having none of it. I entered the room, took her hand, and identified myself as the chaplain. She couldn't respond back as her mouth was covered by an oxygen mask but you could tell she was struggling to get air into her lungs and see the fear in her eyes. I continued to hold her hand. Slowly, a calmness came over her and the fear left her eyes. The monitors verified this as her heart rate and blood pressure both fell. At last, the medical team was able to do their job and successfully intubate her.

A newborn infant cries alone in her crib as she awaits the arrival of her mom. Finally, the mother walks in, picks up the child and almost as quickly the soothing touch of her mother quiets the young child as she falls back asleep in her mother's embrace.

A man sits alone. He has not showered for days. His clothes are dirty. His eyes tired. Hungering for food. He sits alone in a world in which daily he feels the scorn of the stares, the judgments passed on him as people turn their back, and further dismiss him as a member of society. He enters the shelter and is greeted by a volunteer who extends her hand. The guest looks down at first as this is the first time someone has offered to shake his hand in quite some time. The volunteer patiently waits and finally the man puts out his hand. They look each other in the eyes and the volunteer walks the man to the line to receive his meal.

Each of these stories has a common thread, that we also encounter as Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law. Perhaps you did not notice it initially in the reading of Mark's gospel. Listen again, "Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and *took her by the hand* and lifted her up." And there it is, Jesus takes her by the hand and lifts her up.

Now, many healings we are not told of a physical touch. Instead, Jesus simply speaks, recollecting God's creative power as God spoke life into being. Time and time again in the first Chapter of Genesis, we hear/read, "and God said."

- And God said, "Let there be light."
- And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from waters."
- And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear."
- And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night..."
- And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky."
- And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind."
- And God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." (NRSV)

Through healings and casting aside all forces that hinder God's will for humanity and creation via speaking, Jesus' identity is further revealed as the Son of God. His authority is from the One who sent him.

Yet, several of His healings do include physical contact between Jesus and the individual. In the closing verses of chapter one Jesus encounters a leper and, "Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him". In Chapter 5 a woman who had been bleeding for many years touches Jesus' garment and is healed. In similar fashion in Chapter 6 we find many in Genneserat were healed by touching his cloak. And in Chapter 8 Mark writes, "Some people brought a

blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand ... put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him ...”

So, knowing Jesus can simply speak and people are healed, and unclean spirits are rebuked, why does Jesus go out of his way to touch them as well? The answer to that is found in who Jesus is. We are told immediately in verse 1 of Mark’s gospel this is, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Mark establishes not only Jesus’ identity and authority but also the relationship between Son and Father, one built on love and trust. It is about the incarnation of God in human flesh, a child swaddled in cloth by the hands of his mother. It is about the Son of God feeling the touch of human pain, illness, isolation, fear, scorn, and oppression.

It also may be that Jesus touches because He knows the power of touch. He reaches out his hand because in his day many were deemed untouchable due to illness, disease, or a variety of other things that made one “unclean” and thus unable to enter the synagogue or even into community with another. Jesus’ healing today is more than just physical but also a restoration of Simon’s mother-in-law to her “call” and her “vocation” as manager of the household and as minister of hospitality to her guests. Mark’s gospel is insistent on breaking down barriers that divide – Gentile from Judean, righteous from unrighteous, clean from unclean, rich from poor, hungry from full, etc. Through the act of physical touch, Jesus crosses yet another set of boundaries and reveals that the in-breaking of God’s kingdom has no limits.

What we have today is yet again a revelation of the good news, the message, Jesus was sent to proclaim. He does this through the power of the spoken word. He does this through his actions to free, restore, heal and give a glimpse into the glorious kingdom of God. Just as the spoken word of Jesus recollects the beautiful world created by God, so too does his use of touch look forward to the grand portrait painted in Revelation. A day in which, “God will wipe every tear” from the eyes of God’s people.

This is the kingdom we await. The kingdom in which we set our sights on. The kingdom we place our hope in. The kingdom Jesus has prepared for us through the outpouring of his life on a cross and the resurrection of his body on Easter morn. This is the kingdom where all will be set free. All ailments will be cured. All viruses eradicated. Pain will be no more. Death will be no more. This is the kingdom in which God will wipe every tear from the eyes of God's people.

In a world of standing six-feet apart, where far too many remain sheltered-in-place, forced to communicate with a loved one through the screen of an open window or whose final breaths are taken without the loving hand of a spouse, son, daughter or other loved one, it is challenging to speak of the power of physical touch. Michelangelo said, "To touch can be to give life." Mother Theresa said, "Let us touch the dying, the poor, the lonely and the unwanted according to the graces we have received and let us not be ashamed or slow to do the humble work."

I do not know about you, but I have given one too many fist-bumps arm-extended protecting not only myself, but also the one on the other end of that fist bump. I have gone much too long without a handshake or a high-five. At times, it seems the healing, physical touch of Jesus seems so distant. The words of Michelangelo or Mother Theresa gone like a candle in the wind. I know I am not alone in these thoughts and feelings.

Yet, the word of God exists reminding us of the day when God will wipe away all tears. Will we get through this bleak moment in time? We know the day is near. We can see the light at the end of this tunnel. The kingdom Jesus came to usher may be clouded, but it is not absent. We will gather. We will shake hands yet again. We will hug. We will share the cup and break the bread together on our knees shoulder-to-shoulder around the altar of our Lord. It is near; yet, as people of God we will continue to be vigilant in our efforts to love and care for our neighbor through precautionary measures; especially, the most vulnerable among us.

While the best course of action for many of us is to remain six feet apart, masks upon our face and give a wave instead of a handshake, the healing touch of Christ certainly is not absent. It comes to us in a variety of ways. A phone-call or postcard. An email or text message. A video chat or worship service streamed online. Through the power of prayer, even Jesus himself turned to. The healing power of God that calms our fears, give us strength, and reminds us how much God loves us.

And it also comes through so many who have not been able to stand six feet apart. They are our doctors, nurses, chaplains, first-responders, social workers, funeral home personnel, veterinarians, educators, daycare providers, custodial staff, caretakers, pharmacists, staff and volunteers of shelters, grocery and other retail workers, the ones who stand in the cold swabbing noses, vaccinating arms or handing out food as car after car is line up as far as the eye can see. They are so many more. They are the ones whose hands have continued to bring the physical presence, the compassionate arms of God, the loving fingers of the One who wipes away the tears and the presence of the kingdom into this moment in time we long to be free from.

The healing touch of God is never absent. It may not always come in the way of a physical cure. It may not always come in the act of a warm embrace. Yet, it is near. It continues daily to set us free from the sin that lies within through powerful words of forgiveness. It continues to reach into our hearts and fill us with the love of Christ. The hands of Christ continue to lay upon our minds the hope of a new day. The assurance of the resurrection. The picture of the inbreaking kingdom here and now and the fulfilment of that kingdom on the day in which, God will wipe all tears from the eyes of God's beloved sons and daughters. (Revelation 21:4)