

Touching the Face of God
Menno Mennonite Church
December 8, 2019

Purpose: To place the good news of God's incarnation into the context of the Christmas story.

Message: As God with us, God redeems us each by touching us in our humanness.

Scriptures: Luke 8:40-48 (Sermon text—I will read); Luke 1:39-56 (Please read/Have read WITH FEELING)

Synopsis: Touch is tricky. We know that we must be touched—to give and receive touch. Babies who are not touched fail to thrive, and, though we are not primed to admit it, neither do we as adults when we have been away from touch too long. Often noted more in its lack than its over abundance, we know the thirst when we receive touch again after a long time.

Yet we know that touch is not always good. Much harm is done by touching poorly, and it can take us to shadowy places we don't want to go. Yet Jesus as a fully embodied reality heals and connects with touch time and again, putting hands and feet on incarnation. Throughout the Gospels, he touches people, and in touch, heals. This is what Jesus still offers; to touch us and heal us from that which haunts us, coming into contact with that which we might most want to hide, even from our savior. What might it mean for us to take on the appropriate ministry of touch in the name of Christ?

Note: I want to work out a ritual of touch in the name of Christ, in which people can give or receive touch healthily, with the explicit option for people opt out.

Sensory input: Cloths and elements of different textures; blind touching of substances.

Luke 8:40–56 (The Message)

40 On his return [from Geresene],
Jesus was welcomed by a crowd.
They were all there expecting him.

41 A man came up, Jairus by name.
He was president of the meeting place.

He fell at Jesus' feet and begged him to come to his home
42 because his twelve-year-old daughter,
his only child, was dying.

Jesus went with him,
making his way through the pushing, jostling crowd.
43 In the crowd that day there was a woman
who for twelve years had been afflicted with hemorrhages.
She had spent every penny she had
on doctors but not one had been able to help her.

44 She slipped in from behind and touched the edge of Jesus' robe.
At that very moment her hemorrhaging stopped.

45 Jesus said, "Who touched me?"
When no one stepped forward, Peter said,
"But Master, we've got crowds of people on our hands.
Dozens have touched you."

46 Jesus insisted, "Someone touched me.
I felt power discharging from me."

47 When the woman realized that she couldn't remain hidden,
she knelt trembling before him.
In front of all the people, she blurted out her story—
why she touched him and how at that same moment she was healed.

48 Jesus said,
"Daughter, you took a risk trusting me,
and now you're healed and whole.
Live well, live blessed!"

49 While he was still talking,
someone from the leader's house came up and told him,
"Your daughter died. No need now to bother the Teacher."

50 Jesus overheard and said,
"Don't be upset. Just trust me and everything will be all right."

51 Going into the house,
he wouldn't let anyone enter with him
except Peter, John, James, and the child's parents.

52 Everyone was crying and carrying on over her.
Jesus said, "Don't cry. She didn't die; she's sleeping."

53 They laughed at him. They knew she was dead.

54 Then Jesus, gripping her hand, called, "My dear child, get up."

55 She was up in an instant,
up and breathing again!
He told them to give her something to eat.

56 Her parents were ecstatic,
but Jesus warned them to keep quiet.
"Don't tell a soul what happened in this room."

There is something about the power of proximity. If you are excited about something or someone, the closer you can be to them the better. Have you ever lurked outside the locker room after a football or baseball game, hoping to meet some of the players? Perhaps to get word or two in edge wise, shake their hands, get an autograph? There is just a certain energy to it. I was never much of a sports fan, and we are not much of a sports family, but I do remember hanging out behind the dugout before one of the handful of professional games I went to catch some player's time. It was impressive and exciting, even if was basically fundamentally just part of the ritual on our end. I can't remember the player's names, their role, or anything really about the team. This was back when growing up in Cleveland in the 80's meant growing up with the laughing-stock of athletics, no matter what the sport, so there is not that much from the field to remember. I remember the crush of the crowd of the several dozen or so of us gather around trying to come that much closer to greatness, to touch and to be touched, even in the passing. You need to be careful and keep your feet as you sought out that briefest of touch.

Sometimes I wonder what we are missing out on when we left behind the concept of the physical presence of Christ. It is not our thing as Anabaptists—a bit too much for we who were seeking to get a stripped-down version of the church based only on the word. Think about the footage of the faithful waiting in line to meet the Pope, or just to see him ride by in the pope mobile and wave. Its not just because this chap who goes by the name Francis and wears a weird hat is a terribly nice guy, has good hair, or delivers a mean sermon, though I am guessing at least one of these at least has a shot at being true. No; its because the Pope, the vicar of Christ, is the representation of Christ with us, on earth, right here and right now. When the crowds press in and try to touch Francis, they are touching a person in a position of power, yes, but even more so they are stretching their hands out to the one who that person is meant to represent. I am guessing it is a good deal like the crowds in our story today, only Jesus didn't go around with highly trained bodyguards and bullet proof glass. As much as it might not be our style, I have to admit there is something aspirational about having someone, some thing to touch in the name of Christ.

Not that this is really our thing, mind. We of European stock are not touchy people. We come with a cultural bias against it. In cultural anthropological studies where the habits of touch during a simple coffee between friends at a café were observed based on their instance of touch. The British touched not at all. Northern Europeans touched often fewer than 10 times per

meeting. Puerto Ricans touched more than 180 times. For many of us, we rather value our personal space, and get more than a little creeped out when we don't have it. Yet we need as many as 8 instances of touch a day in order to thrive. I am willing to bet that most of us are not well near that number, and might even find it a bit daunting to consider 8 as a required number. After all, touch is a sensitive topic. Too often the physical domain has been used for domination and power rather than healing and health. We have seen touch without respect, without permission claim far too many lives and psyches not to take it seriously. We must find a way to make safe, supportive touch a part of our way of being where boundaries can be set and maintained without shame and without fear, even while we work hard at acknowledging the needs we each carry for human contact. In my singles years, I can't tell you how big a deal it was to get a hug when I needed it.

Let's get back to our story. It is about 2 people Jesus healed, embedded into one telling: the daughter of Jairus, the leader, and the woman who reached out in hope of touching Jesus. These are both touch stories, and it is not accidental they are told such by Luke I think—both the daughter and the woman having 12 years attached to them. First the faithful woman in the crowd. People in the crowds reached out to touch Jesus and He touched them with power. The power of God went out from Him to heal and restore. A woman in the crowd who had suffered for twelve long years from some sort of bleeding. Doctors were of no help and she had spent all her money but still there was no cure. Worse, she was considered an outcast of society, ceremonially unclean according to Leviticus 15 as long as her condition persists. This is one of the people who were to be placed and kept on the outside of the community lest her ritual impurity be brought to the whole. This poor woman had been unclean for twelve long years; no-one touched her for fear that they then would become unclean.

It is understandable, then why she had no intention of meeting Jesus face to face. She thought, "if I only touch His cloak, I will be healed." Silently and persistently, and in faith, she made her way through the crowd, came up behind the Master Healer and touched His cloak. Sure enough, immediately she felt the bleeding had stopped. Quickly slipping away, imagine her surprise, her terror when Jesus turned around and asked, "Who touched Me?" With the crowd pressing Him on every side, Peter found it a strange question. But Jesus insisted, "Someone touched Me, because I know power has gone out from me." The woman knew that she had no choice but to come to Jesus. She came trembling. Would He be angry and scold her, treat her

harshly and reject her? After all, she had been unclean all these years, and besides, she was a woman. She had real reason to expect threat here. She managed to tell Him the whole story of her life, her feeling of despair and the burden of being an outcast. She took a huge risk and told it in the presence of all those people in the crowd: How the bleeding had stopped and that she had been healed. No doubt, her story came out, mixed with tears of sadness and joy. But Jesus was touched by who he saw. Perhaps, He placed His hand on her shoulder and then He called her “Daughter,” the only woman so addressed by Jesus, “Your faith has healed You, go in peace.”

Jairus in his own right was in the same boat as this woman, demonstrating the impartiality of suffering, and, in turn, the impartiality of the incarnation as Jesus goes here too and, in his touch, accomplishes the extraordinary. He had an ailing daughter, perceptively beyond the ability for anyone to be of help. He had done what he could, and sought Jesus’ touch every bit as much as the woman on the way. Both people required Jesus’ touch. Both incurable situations were brought to change through the touch of Jesus. And they are both met with the same results—miraculously and fully. The woman healed was brought back from the dead every bit as much as Jairus’ daughter. That is the story of God with us that Luke is trying to convey, and as such extraordinary fashion.

Have you ever imagined what that would have been like—to touch the Word of God made flesh? Have you ever stopped to wonder what it would have been to simply reach out and touch, to be touched in return? It is a heady thing, an inspiring thought. Give it a moment’s thought—even just putting yourself in the pressing crowd and bumping into the Christ.

Perhaps there is something here for us to reclaim. Perhaps we would do well to reconnect to our identities as the representatives of Christ. We are given to saying “Jesus has no hands but ours; no feet but ours”. Most of the time we use these words to prod ourselves to works of love in the name of Christ: serving a meal, giving a ride, rebuilding a house—all the other stuff that we do in the name of Christ from the most ordinary acts of service—printing the bulletins for the service—to years long expeditions around the world to share the gospel. All of that is good, noble and necessary—the more the better. But always a metaphor, always a euphemism for doing something else. Are we perhaps overlooking a far more practical meaning of the phrase: Christ has no hands but ours—reach out and touch in the name of the Christ that dwells within the touch with healing, grace, and hope even where we might least expect. What

would it mean to reach out in faith to touch the hem of the robe of the one who walks in grace and power? How would it change us to be charged, not unlike the Pope, to represent Christ—God with us—in the midst of what is often a world longing to be embraced, to return God’s embrace?

We claim the priesthood of all believers; might it mean that we are called too to bless and touch in the name of Christ? Hopefully, things don’t get out of control, and we become one of those after which the throngs clamour—but you never know. What healing—in what ever fashion it might happen-- if we found ourselves reaching however timidly for the hem of Jesus’ robe, expecting the very cloth to imbue power to us? What might we accomplish if we were to sincerely look into ourselves when we offer our greeting to one another in the name of Christ, and feel even partially what that means—that we claim the name of the Lord and invoke that name into the blessings we give, the hugs we offer? What are the praises we might sing along with Mary of how God has used us to touch those around us? How might it change us to not only remember the time when Jesus touched us, like a ball player signing an autograph to be cherished and recalled, but to be invested by CHRIST to touch in his name as a sign of God’s compassion, God’s forgiveness, God’s love, God’s peace? Isn’t scary? Isn’t wonderful? Perhaps this is among the best gifts we might in this season.

God is walking by and inviting us to reach out and touch, even as Christ himself touches us. We have been empowered in the name of Christ to pass on the peace of Christ that passes all understanding, and in so doing, be forever changed.