



In Touch
2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (June 27, 2021)

Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of human touch not only for survival but also for a healthy development. I am talking about healthy and respectful touch, of course, and not touch that is unwelcome and abusive.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, touch was banned, face masks and distance were introduced. One of the most difficult realities to face during that time was the fact that so many of those infected died without anyone by their bedside due to the seriousness and infectiousness of the virus.

In today's gospel, touch and the presence of crowds dominate the scene. As Jesus is surrounded by a crowd on the lakeshore, his intervention is urgently requested by Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, desperate to save his child. He begs Jesus to "come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." He requests physical healing for his daughter but Mark uses a verb that indicates that more is at stake: the verb also means "to save," the kind of saving that will be finalized at the cross (Mk. 15:30-31; see also John 3:17 and Romans 5:9-10).

Jesus obliges and the crowd presses in on him on his way to see the child. Something unexpected happens; something that slows him down and requires his attention. Someone in the crowd touches him in a special way. This is not a touch produced by a tight walk in a crowd where shoulder rubs shoulder. It's a special touch, startling, where "power had gone forth from him."

The gospel is silent on the possible rise of anxiety in Jairus as Jesus gets distracted. Jesus' compassion and willingness to save all might turn out to be a negative drawback. Jesus, however, doesn't seem to be concerned with the moral dilemma of choosing between checking out what just happened and getting to the girl as quickly as possible. This seems to be a pattern for Jesus as another delay in action is recorded in the gospel of John (ch. 11) when Lazarus was dying.

The sentence that describes the nameless woman is full of past participles: having suffered, having spent money, having not benefitted, and having gotten worse, having heard about Jesus, and having come from behind...then comes the long delayed main verb: she touched [Jesus'] garment. Her twelve-year long illness is presented as a long and helpless torment. She has tried everything; now she is left with a bold action. What the desperate woman is sure of obtaining from this famous miracle worker is "salvation" from her draining disability which after many attempts and at great cost to her had only grown worse. And in fact, the power that comes out of Jesus "heals" her.

What catches Jesus' attention, Mark tells us, is the unintentional and unrequested miracle. The woman is certainly healed, Mark tells us, but Jesus doesn't seem to appreciate it. He is concerned with something that is definitely missing. He is not satisfied with collateral healing. What he has come to do is "save" the world; what he has come to model for us is "saving interactions," encounters where the dignity of a person is recognized and her wholeness restored. Touch, to



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him, is more than physical contact; it involves personal interaction and emotional sharing. In fact, we can physically touch without being “in touch,” and one can remain “in touch” across miles and oceans.

It’s only after Jesus asks for the person to identify herself; only after he endures the ridicule of the disciples; only after the woman steps forward and confesses in fear and trembling, falls down before him, and tells him the whole truth that she is “made well” and receives the kind of healing that saves. This kind of wellness comes only in the personal encounter with Jesus that involves self-expression, open and honest communication, and grace. No taking without asking, thank you. Jesus does not want to be treated as a distributor of miracles.

It’s our personal truth that Jesus is interested in. The world seems to give credence to lies all too easily. People seem to have lost respect for honest and holy relationships. A grasping life of greed, power grabbing, and indifference to the wellbeing of the Earth with all the suffering it produces can easily be detected in inter-personal and international relations. When approaching Jesus with our need for healing, are we willing to engage him in truthful conversation?

When Jesus is finally ready to move on, the news arrives that the girl is dead. There is respect and deference for the teacher as the carriers of the sad news don’t want him to be troubled any further. But Jesus responds to the devastating news by assuring Jairus that he needs not to fear and to continue to have faith. At this point, Jesus reduces the number of people he allows to follow him. He names only an intimate group of disciples, specifically Peter, James and his brother John.¹

The young child is surrounded by others (probably professional mourners), and Jesus changes the scene by giving access to her family and the core group of disciples. How precious it is to be present, when possible, by a loved one’s side. We are aware, however, of the one body to which we belong and sing about in our eucharistic liturgy. We are never alone: God is with us as well as the community of saints, which always surrounds us. Physical bodies are always best, but in times of crisis, we take comfort in the invisible “ties that bind” us.

Once alone, Jesus holds the little girl’s hand and commands her to “get up.” And immediately she does. Imagine the gasp of amazement, the rejoicing! The verbs used to report Jesus’ command to get up and her actual doing so recur frequently in the Christian Scriptures, beyond the everyday use, to speak of Jesus’ resurrection. The girl’s rising from the dead anticipates that of Jesus. It’s this power that is at the basis of all his healings. In him there is the very power of God to create and grant life.

¹ This intimate group was called closer in other occasions. See Mk. 9:2; 13:3; and 14:33.



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It's this power of the resurrection that brings us peace through all our ailing. It's the free gift of grace. The sharing of the peace is not a mere meet-and-greet break in the action of the liturgy. It symbolizes the ultimate unity we have with each other in, through, and with Christ, who has broken down all barriers. This act of generous and vulnerable encounter with the other, done in honesty of heart, surpasses all adversities and heals all wounds. It's the peace of the risen Lord we offer, an act that requires and expects nothing less than conversion, sincerity, humility. We don't give it grudgingly simply because it's prescribed by the liturgy. We give it openly and trustingly, with the deep desire to overcome differences and barriers and rejoice in resurrected life. We offer the peace knowing full well that it isn't a feeling we can force ourselves in or generate in others, a feeling that might at times conflict with our own state of mind and reactive sentiments. We give a sign of the peace God intends for all of us, a peace into which we hope to grow, a peace intended to sooth our fears and transform us from enemies to friends and fellow members of the Body of Christ. We give the kiss of peace that makes us brothers and sisters; we hug or shake hands and in these times of covid a simple wave of the hand acknowledging the mutual presence and common fragility.

May we know the divine touch that brings peace and healing. May our wounded and suffering world find salvation and wholeness in the resurrecting power of Jesus. Amen.