

A TOUCHING TALE

Carl Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 130; Mark 5:21-43

“She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.’”

Mark 5:27-28

It’s been an interesting week for me, here at the church — a week I’d known was coming, ever since coming here as your pastor. I just didn’t know when it would happen.

I’m speaking, of course, of President Trump being in residence, just down the road from here. On Friday afternoon, there were something like 20 State Police cars parked in the church lot. They were using our lot as a staging area, as they waited for orders to assist the Secret Service with security arrangements.

I went out and spoke with the officers. They’re grateful for this church’s offer to let them use the parking lot — which happens to be the closest lot to the Trump National Golf Course. On a more personal level, they also appreciate access to the rest rooms, as anyone would. We’re glad to do our small part, here at Lamington Church, to support the work of law enforcement.

Twenty State Police cars represents a pretty big allotment of the people’s financial resources. And that’s just New Jersey. Who knows how many Secret

Service agents and other Federal officers are involved? There's also, I'm told, a no-fly zone for private planes.

All of this is typical for a President. When you hold that office, you just can't get in a car and go. All those people have to go with you — or, meet you there, as the New Jersey State Police do.

It's all for the purpose of maintaining distance. Yes, we are a democracy, here in these United States, but an ordinary citizen like you or me is not entitled to drop in and visit the President. You've got to be invited: and, should you receive such an invitation, you've got to make your way through all those concentric circles of security.

I wonder what security Jesus had around him, when his boat landed on the shore of the Sea of Galilee — as Mark tells it — and he began walking through a large crowd who had come to see him? We know he had some of his disciples with him; you can almost imagine how some of them formed a sort of flying wedge ahead of their Lord, opening up a space for him to walk. It was a good deal less sophisticated than State Police cars and a no-fly zone, but it got the job done, First-century style.

Jesus needed that sort of assistance because he was on an urgent errand.

There was no time to lose. They'd received a desperate message a short time before from a man named Jairus, whom Mark calls "a ruler of the synagogue," Jairus' 12-year-old daughter is sick to the point of death. Would Jesus come and heal her?

Of course he would! Everything we know about Jesus says he would do that for anyone, but this is a man of great personal influence and power. He's a mover and shaker — certainly in that community, but possibly on a wider scale as well. If Jesus had a p.r. director managing his itinerary, the Jairus visit would have been on the very top of that day's agenda: highlighted in bright yellow, circled in red Sharpie with a few exclamation marks.

So, he's a man with a mission. You can picture him striding purposefully along the street, his disciples calling out, "Make way, make way for Rabbi Jesus!" All around that phalanx of disciples is the surging crowd: voices calling out, hands reaching out to try to touch him.

It was holy bedlam!

Within that crowd, there is a woman. Not a powerful or famous woman: but one who has a very personal reason for seeking Jesus.

The woman is sick. She's been sick for twelve long years. She's spent all her

money on every sort of doctor, but no one's been able to help her. This strange rabbi with his healing powers is her last hope.

The woman's particular ailment has implications for how other people treat her. Mark tells us the woman has been suffering from "hemorrhages" — or what some other translations call "a flow of blood" — for all those many years. What he means by that is that her monthly period was continuous. The flow of blood never ended.

If you know anything about Orthodox Jewish communities — now, as well as in Jesus' time— then you know they all contain a building called a *mikveh*, or ritual bath. During their "time of the month," women live in semi-seclusion. Their physical relationship with their husbands is suspended. They're considered to be ritually unclean, according to the Law of Moses. At the end of that time, they go down to the *mikveh*, bathe, and are declared clean again.

This woman, because of her unusual medical problem, has been in the unclean state for a dozen years. What that means is that she is a virtual outcast from the community. If she'd ever been married, the marriage was over long ago. If she was lucky, her own family sent her a little food every once in a while. If she was not, she begged on the streets.

She's the very picture of alienation and aloneness. Yes, she wants to be

healed of her medical condition. But even more than that, she wants to be reconciled with her community, to no longer be an object of shame and pity.

That morning, she covers her head, so no one will recognize her. She slips through to the front of the crowd. Jesus' disciples — in State Trooper mode — block her way, but as they pass by, she falls to the ground, reaches out, and touches the hem of his robe.

It's a miracle. A powerful feeling sweeps over her, and she knows in that instant that she's been healed.

But then the unexpected happens. Jesus stops in his tracks, and looks around. "Who touched my clothes?" he asks.

What a ridiculous question! The disciples have no answer, because despite their best efforts to keep the crowd at arms' length, lots of people have reached through and touched him.

But he's not interested in lots of people, in that moment. He's only concerned for the one: the one who touched him and was healed.

Fearfully, the woman steps forward and identifies herself. Instead of scolding her, of course, he blesses her: "Your faith has made you well; go in peace." Go in peace: what blessed words, for a woman who has known such little peace for such a long time!

As for the other leading character in this story — the twelve-year old daughter of Jairus, ruler of the synagogue — she does die, after all. In part this is because Jesus tarried, there on the street, to talk with the distraught woman who has touched his robe, to hear her story, to give her his blessing. He continues on to Jairus' house anyway — even though everyone told him it was no use — and there he raises the little girl from the dead. He's the son of God, after all — and the love of God is without limit. It's not limited even by death. Just because one person receives the gift of God's love doesn't mean the supply of divine love for others is in any way diminished.

This is a story about human touch: and what a powerful force for good it can be in our lives. Earlier in this worship service we shared greetings with one another. We passed the peace: and as we did so, we reached out and touched a person beside us: a handshake, a brief hug, a touch on the shoulder. Then we moved farther afield, beyond the people we may have come here with. We touched *them*, too: a symbol of welcome, a symbol of community in Christ. It's such a simple act, but it communicates so much.

Think of all the times we touch other people during a typical day. Even strangers rate a handshake. As for those we love: a touch, an embrace, means so

much more.

There's reason to believe that human touch is essential to human well-being — especially when we're young. There's a famous story of Frederick the Great of Prussia — a powerful ruler of the European Enlightenment, a man of great scientific curiosity as well as a leader of armies. Frederick once conducted an unusual scientific experiment into the development of human language. There was a theory, in those days, that the babbling of infants was, in some mysterious sense, related to the ancient language of Eden: but that children lost this oldest of mother-tongues as they grew and learned the language of their parents.

Frederick devised an experiment to test this theory. He had his scientists take some newborn, orphaned babies, and isolate them from all physical contact with human beings. The babies would be kept in separate rooms, with no contact with each other. Not a word of language was to be spoken in their presence.

Specially trained nurses would see to the babies' physical needs in their isolated rooms — feeding them, making sure they stayed warm — but the nurses were forbidden to pick them up and hug them. Once the children grew old enough to speak, the plan went, they would be brought into the presence of other children in the experiment, to see if they could converse with one another.

Frederick's experiment was an utter failure. Not one of those poor children

lived beyond infancy — let alone to the age when language begins to develop in earnest. The one thing King Frederick did learn from his cruel and ill-considered experiment was that the physical touch of another human being is essential to life. If babies are not picked up, and hugged, and caressed, they have but a slim chance of surviving to adulthood.

The woman who touched Jesus' robe that day, because of her unclean state, was likewise starved of human touch. Somehow she knew that, if she could squeeze through that crowd and touch Jesus, she would be blessed. And she was: in a beautiful and life-changing way.

At the southern border of our nation, there are people who are hungry for a different sort of touch. They've traveled from afar — very often, all the way through Mexico from the dangerous little countries of Honduras, Guatemala or El Salvador — at great expense and personal risk. They've heard the United States is a country where they can live, safe and free, where their boys will not be tattooed and forced into gangs and where their daughters won't be at risk of assault. They will no longer have to pay tribute money to the men with the guns, just to run a small business or work for a living. In leaving their home villages, they've sold most of what they owned to pay for the long journey: isolating and impoverishing

themselves as surely as that woman with the flow of blood was isolated and impoverished.

Their trip north is a desperate gambit, as desperate as hers. If they can but reach out and touch the hem of this powerful and welcoming republic called the United States of America, if they can but set foot across the border and apply for political asylum — a procedure they *must* follow, according to our own asylum laws — then they just may find healing.

What sort of touch will they and their children receive in return, for their bold and risky gesture? And what will become of their young children, if they are separated from the loving touch of their parents: for a long time, and possibly forever?

It's a great thing our government has done, in recent days, abandoning the former policy of separating parents and children at the border, as their cases move through the immigration courts. Not every asylum application will be approved, of course: but we've always been the sort of country that welcomes the inquisitive touch of "the tired, the poor, the hungry masses yearning to breath free" — and that extends to them the opportunity, at the very least, to argue their case.

In a short while, we will receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, in

which we recall a different sort of touch: how our Lord touched the bread and broke it, then touched the cup, inviting his friends to drink. As we eat and drink, experiencing the materiality of this sacrament, we too are reaching out to touch him. May we know how he touches and blesses us in return — and may we, in our lives, be a blessing to others!

Let us pray:

**In your presence, O Lord,
all achievement, all privilege, all power falls away.
We are damaged souls in need of healing,
reaching out through the chaos of the crowd
to find that one blessing we most need.
Around this table,
may each of us find what we're looking for:
and in your touch may we find life abundant. Amen.**

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