

“Who Touched Me?”

In the name of him in whom we have the salvation of the Lord, dear friends in Christ: In today's Gospel lesson we see the intervention of Jesus in the lives of two people who are desperately ill. One is a woman with a chronic condition that has grown worse over time, and the other is a young girl with an acute illness that has placed her at the death's door – and as the account unfolds, beyond it. Both of their stories are human tragedies that are heartbreaking in their own way. But it's hard not to notice that as different as their two situations are, there are also a number of similarities. Consider: both of the afflicted are female. The theologically loaded number twelve comes up with respect to both: for one it's her age, and for the other it's the number of years she has been suffering. And both are ultimately cured through physical contact with Jesus. These connections coupled with the way their two stories are intertwined in the text suggest that there's more here than meets the eye. That's as we should expect because the healing miracles of Jesus recorded in the Bible are never simply accounts of how he happened to cure somebody. No, Jesus always uses physical healings to teach and illustrate his far more important work of curing us where we need it most: in our hearts, our minds, and our souls. He didn't come to rescue us merely from the aches, pains, and sorrows of this life; rather he came to rescue us from the worst disease of all, namely sin and its consequences. He came to save us from spending eternity in hell. With these things in mind, let's take a closer look at the text.

Capernaum is a city on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. During the first half or so of Jesus' ministry it served as his base of operations. And that makes sense because it was the city from which at least four of his disciples ran their fishing business. It was home to them. So, typically Jesus would spend a week or two there preaching, teaching, and healing where his disciples were able to look after family business; and then he'd take his ministry and his men on the road for a while, visiting other cities and towns throughout Galilee and beyond; always returning to Capernaum where the cycle would begin again.

Today's text begins when Jesus is returning by boat from one of these trips. While he was away a severe illness struck the young daughter of the synagogue leader, a man named Jairus. Jairus knows Jesus. He regularly allows Jesus to preach as a visiting Rabbi in his synagogue. So he also knows the power of Jesus to heal. He's seen him do so more times than he can count. The trouble is that Jesus isn't here now when his daughter needs him. So no doubt he has been anxiously awaiting Jesus' return before it's too late. It's likely that his whole congregation is worried with him and praying for the daughter; and they're all looking out for any sign Jesus might be coming back.

Sure enough, it happens. Somebody reports that a boat is coming in – the same one Jesus left in with his disciples several days ago. And so by the time Jesus comes ashore, a whole crowd has gathered to meet him. It's not just Jairus and his congregation; there are hundreds of others there, many pressing forward to appeal to Jesus for healing for themselves or someone else. Others, perhaps the majority, are fans and spectators who just want to see the now famous Jesus in action. Somehow, through sheer force of will, driven by the kind of devotion a father has for his only child, Jairus manages to push his way through this thronging mass of humanity to the front where he can make his appeal to Jesus. “Please, come at once. My daughter's at the point of death. Lay your hands on her. Save her.” And Jesus agrees.

But it's awfully slow going. The crowd continues to press in on Jesus, making forward motion difficult. No doubt Jairus is attempting to clear a path in his urgency to get Jesus to his daughter; but there are simply too many people. He'd need a whole platoon of riot police to do the job.

Meanwhile, standing in this vast crowd, is a woman who is all alone. It's likely that she's come from some distance to see Jesus because it's apparent that no one in the crowd knows her. If they did, they would most likely know of her condition – a persistent flow of uterine blood – which, according to the Law of Moses, rendered a woman unclean. Anything she touched and anyone who touched her also became unclean. She has suffered from this highly personal condition for twelve long years. She's spent everything she has on doctors and their supposed remedies; but none has done any good. Quite the contrary, she's only gotten worse. So she's broke. Physically she's anemic and likely hungry. She's possibly in pain. And worse still is her isolation. She's been pretty much cut off from all human contact. No one can live with someone who is perpetually unclean. Her family, if she has one, is forced to keep her at a distance, as is everyone else. So she's all alone in the world, even standing in this crowd of strangers – who if they knew of her condition would drive her away.

She's here, however, risking discovery and public humiliation because she has heard about Jesus. How she's heard about him or from whom, we don't know. We do know that she's heard enough about him to believe in him. She believes that he's from God and that he has the power to heal – he's been proving it wherever he goes. But she's got a problem. It's not like she can walk up to him and explain her situation like everyone else. The blind, the lame, the deaf – their afflictions are “socially acceptable”, if you will. Even the lepers who aren't allowed to come near people can call to Jesus at a distance and he'll heal them. And that's okay because everyone knows they're lepers; they can see by looking at them. But her affliction is private. It's personal. It's hidden. And due to the nature of it, she's not supposed to be here in contact with all these other people. And if she's not supposed to be touching other people, how much more should she not touch someone she looks up to as holy man of God?

It's for these reasons that she determines not to say anything; but only to touch Jesus. And even then, she doesn't want to touch Jesus himself, but just the tassel of his garment. Jewish men wore these poncho-like mantles over their tunics that had little decorative tassels hanging from the four corners. It's one of those she wants to touch. She wants to keep her contact with him to an absolute minimum. And by placing herself strategically in the crowd, maybe up against a wall, she waits until he passes by and then steps into the hole in the crowd made by his passing, and reaches down and brushes her hand on one of the back tassels. That's all it takes. She knows instantly that she's healed. And her plan is to slip away silently into the crowd and disappear.

But she's not the only one who knows she's been healed. Jesus feels the release of power from his body. He knows that someone has just received from him a miracle; but he doesn't know who. Remember that though Jesus is God, during his earthly ministry he typically did not use his divine knowledge. He lived among us as a man for the most part. So he stops and asks, “Who touched me?” To the disciples it seems a silly question. Jesus is being mobbed. Since he left the boat, scores, maybe hundreds have touched him. But Jesus is looking for someone in particular: the one who was just healed.

He doesn't do this to be cruel to her or to expose her to public shame. No, he means to extend the fullness of his blessing. There are no secret or anonymous believers in Jesus. Coming to Jesus means having an ongoing relationship with him. Think what she would have

had if she did manage to slip away undetected. She'd be healed, sure; but she'd still be isolated in a sense. Her relationship with Jesus – what little there was – would be over. And she'd always be left with the sense that by coming to Jesus and touching him the way she did, against all Law and tradition, that she'd done something terribly wrong. By seeking her out, Jesus intends free her completely.

And as he looks around to see who it is that's been healed, she feels the spotlight of attention on her. Hearing his words and feeling his gaze makes her very self-conscious. She can't hide it. In fear she falls before him, expecting, no doubt, to be harshly criticized and condemned when she explains what she's done and why. And you can visualize the crowd gasp in horror and back up and stand away when she describes the condition from which she's been healed. But to her surprise and great relief, Jesus does not condemn her. "Daughter", he calls her; and so doing he assures her that she is part of his greater family. It's the right thing you've done. There is no one so unclean or any person with condition too shameful that I won't receive her into my fellowship and heal. "Your faith in me has made you well. Go in peace and with my blessing."

It's wonderful news for her and an important lesson for the whole crowd. But as they all consider this good news, bad news arrives from the home of Jairus. "It's too late. Your daughter is dead. Why bother the Teacher any further?" This is important: the people who sent this message know about Jesus and his power to heal. But they believe that there are some conditions that are beyond his ability to deal with. Jairus also believes this, which is why he is in such a hurry. He has to get Jesus to his daughter before she dies; because after that it will be too late. And thus the words of the message hit Jairus like a sucker punch in the gut. He's devastated. So close and yet so far. But Jesus has overheard the message, and he tells Jairus not to lose hope. "Don't fear, only believe."

I rather expect that at this point the crowd backs away again. Most of them know where Jesus was heading and why, and perhaps they all feel guilty about their part in obstructing his path and keeping Jesus from a child who desperately needed his help. In any case, when Jesus and those with him finally arrive at the home of Jairus, they see the family, the neighbors, and the members of the synagogue all weeping and wailing in the street according to the mourning customs of the day. Jesus tells them to knock off the racket; the child is merely sleeping. They laugh at him. It's always amazed me that so many of them could so swiftly switch from crying to laughing. It says something about the shallowness of their sorrow. I suppose most of them are thinking, "It's a sad thing and I'm here to mourn with the family; but I'm sure glad it wasn't my child who died." But you would think that since they didn't believe Jesus could help, they'd be angry with him for giving the parents hope. But no, they just laugh at Jesus. And they would have recoiled in horror when he entered the home. You see, according to the Law of Moses, a dead body was unclean. Only the immediate family attended it. It was to be washed and buried within 24 hours. And for some time after that, those who had immediate contact with the corpse were considered unclean. As the leader of the synagogue, it's doubtful that even Jairus would have entered his daughter's room. You can't lead public worship or handle the scrolls of sacred Scripture if you're unclean.

But none of this bothers Jesus. With the parents and three of his disciples Jesus goes into the room where the girl's body lies. And reaching down he takes gently her by the hand, and says, "Little girl, wake up." And she does. Her life returns to her. She sits up, gets out of bed, and begins to walk around. And though they are not recorded for us, I've always wondered if her first words weren't "What happened? Who touched me?" Then again, maybe seeing

Jesus, she didn't have to ask. She knew who touched her even in the uncleanness of death and called her back to life with his powerful word.

I mentioned earlier that the healing miracles of Jesus are never just displays of his divine power or merely about physical cures. Instead, they are always illustrations of greater spiritual realities. Jesus did not come to heal us of every ailment in this life, nor has he promised to raise any of our dead loved ones before the Last Day when he will raise all the dead. That's not the message here. What we are to see in these two healings is how Jesus deals with us and our greatest affliction – sin – right now.

The woman with the flow of blood that makes her unclean: that's you and me. We are all infected with dread disease of sin that makes us unclean. It isolates us. It ruins our relationships. And we're afraid to talk about. We don't want anyone to know how unclean our rotten hearts really are. Why, imagine if people could read your thoughts and know your ambition, your selfishness, your envy, your greed, and your evil desires. What if they knew what you really thought about them? So, of course, we try to hide all these things. And we look for a cure, thinking that perhaps the Law of God can help us. It seems pretty obvious that that's what God's rules are for: to tell you what you ought to think and how you ought to behave. And so we go to the spiritual doctors, the vast majority of which can prescribe exactly what you ought to do. The Law says don't be selfish; give freely to others. Don't hate people; love them – even your enemies. Don't lust; think only pure thoughts. Don't show disrespect to your parents or the leaders God has placed over you. Don't obey them grudgingly; no, honor and gladly obey them. See? It's simple! Except it's not, is it? Quite the contrary, that kind of prescription only makes matters worse. It only reveals more clearly how unclean you really are inside because the harder you try to do what God demands, the more you realize you can't.

What you need to do is touch Jesus. You need to hear his word of forgiveness and restoration. Only he can take your uncleanness away; but to do that, you have to risk exposure. You have to admit in public that you need to be cleansed and healed by him. There are no secret Christians. But neither do you have to fear that Jesus will be repulsed by the extent or depravity of your sins. He's seen it all. And he came to save you from it all – save you by taking all of your uncleanness to the shameful cross where he suffered and died for you. Nor do you have to worry that you are somehow beyond redemption – that perhaps there are some sins so terrible and so deadly that even Jesus can't bring you back and save you from them. It's not possible. This is what these two healing miracles show us.

And they show us how Jesus deals with us in our sins: he touches us and he speaks his word. He did it for you first when you were dead in sin and trespass. In the water of Baptism he touched you, gave you life in him, and washed you clean from sin. He does it as you confess your sins either in public here at worship or privately to a pastor and hear landing on your ear the sound of his voice: "I forgive you of all of your sins". And it happens when you come to Holy Communion. Doing so is an act of confession. It's a public testimony that you are a sinner in need of the forgiveness Jesus offers in and through the sacrament. And it's also a confession of your faith: that you believe through the touch of Jesus – his body and blood given for you – you will be cleansed of your sin and your relationship with God will be restored.

Dear friends, Jesus asked the question, "Who touched me?" Now and always let us each confess, "I did, and I am eternally grateful." In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!