

“He Took Her By the Hand”

Mark 1:29-39

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All too often, when we hear stories of touching, the touching is wounding and unwanted and a terrible violation. There's no place for that kind of touching in church life or school life or family life or business life or life anywhere. So, it's refreshing to read a Bible story where the touching is healing and comforting. Peter's mother-in-law was running a high fever. No doubt there was panic in the household. Jesus, sensing the panic, simply took her by the hand and the fever left her. It was a healing touch. Call it a miracle; call it a spontaneous healing; I call it the kind of touch that creates an environment for healing. Though I was not present on that occasion in Peter's house to witness that ministry of touch, I have often witnessed the difference it makes when a loving touch is extended and received. It's a beautiful thing to behold.

Most every country/western singer who ever recorded an album included the song, “Put your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee.” Johnnie Cash and Loretta Lynn and Dolly Parton all recorded it. The verses of this song speak of the difference it makes when the hand that touches your hand is a loving a hand, a Jesus hand, a hand that lifts you from a place of despair to a place of hope. I don't know if Jesus was a fan of country/western music, but he understood something of the power of a caring touch.

When I take small groups to Malawi, our first stop is always the St. Mary's Orphanage. 120 children call that campus their home.

Within minutes of our arrival, children are walking with us hand-in-hand. And my experience is that we are both healed, both orphan and South Church visitor. There is just something that is conveyed through the simple gesture of holding hands. I can't say that a fever is lifted. But I can say that a trust is established; a joy is shared; some imagined barrier is transcended.

As you may know, I play in a tennis doubles group every Monday. In this sport there is a certain etiquette. When the match is over, win or lose, everyone meets at the net to shake hands. In our group, there is now a slight confusion. The traditional handshake has given way to the knuckle bump. Sometimes one player offers a hand and the opponent a bump. I guess that's a hand bump! I'm not sure how this evolution of etiquette came about, but the meaning remains the same: *we did mighty battle for three sets of tennis, but all is well between us.*

When I was preparing to have a knee replacement surgery three years ago, I got a call from Rabbi Marantz at Congregational Kol Haverim. He asked if I'd like him to come to the hospital to offer a blessing for healing. I said something like YES! PLEASE! I remember his visit as if it were yesterday. He wore a prayer shawl. He chanted an ancient Hebrew blessing. And then he placed his hand on my forehead and invoked the peace of God. I sort of forget the words, but I remember the touch. It was as if energy passed through his hand into my head. There was a transference of spirit. I can only say that in some mysterious way his touch contributed to the healing environment I needed. Unlike Peter's mother-in-law, I didn't jump right up out of bed that day, but the next day, I did!

Now that my own parenting days are over, I get a deep satisfaction out of watching young parents picking up their teary-eyed children and holding them securely, touching them lovingly such that they feel comforted. Families are most often the place where the healing touch is experienced. My dad was not what you'd call a hugger. I don't remember him putting his arm around me. I remember his smile and the sound of his voice, and the smell of his breath, but touching was not his way of conveying love.

So, in 1994, when he had his brain tumor surgery and he ended up in a rehab facility in Ludlow, Massachusetts; I went up there to visit him. The rehab lasted about one month. The physical therapy staff explained that it was time for the family to learn how to transfer my dad from the wheelchair into the passenger seat of a vehicle. Several of us gathered there for the training. The therapist put her arm around my dad's shoulders and gently lifted him to his feet; then swung him around into the car. It was a very intimate exchange. The touching was quite lovely to watch. When she asked which of us wanted to go first to learn this maneuver, my hand shot right up in the air. My whole body leaped forward. I couldn't wait to wrap my arm around this man who was my father. I don't know if it meant anything to him. It meant the world to me. The gentle caring communicated in that brief time of touching is still with me. I still cherish it. He was the one with the brain tumor; but I was the one who was healed.

So, this story of Jesus taking Peter's mother-in-law by the hand and raising her up is a precious story for our times. When the stories we hear on the evening news are stories of inappropriate touching, this Bible account invites conversation as to what makes for a healing touch, a Jesus touch, a touch that contributes to an environment for healing.

Shortly, we'll be invited to take bread from the Communion loaf and to hold that bread in our hands, to feel the texture of that bread. I'm glad for those moments of touching the bread. Whether it is wheat bread or rye bread or corn bread, it's a symbolic way of putting my hand in the hand of the man from Galilee. And in so doing, I remain in the greatest of hope. Amen.