
If I but touch ...
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
June 27, 2021
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Mark 5:21-43

[image: cottage]

I'm pretty sure that the authors of the lectionary didn't realize that we are heading into summer here. If they had known that, we would probably have had readings about kicking back and relaxing. Readings about warm weather, cottage life, enjoying time with family and friends. What were the lectionary authors thinking? We want to talk about being relaxed, refreshed and restored over the coming summer. But the lectionary is giving us readings about "healing". Well, sure, healing is great I guess, but healing always sounds like a lot of hard work. Don't people have cottages so that they don't have to deal with these sorts of things over the summer? Don't we all just try to escape from reality over the summer? I should really just stop talking now and go home and light my BBQ.

[image: Jesus healing]

But you know, there are a few interesting things about the stories where Jesus heals people. Think of all the stories you know about of Jesus healing someone. Is there a common thread that run through those stories? What do you notice about those stories when you think of them collectively?

Well, there are likely a few threads. And I should probably research them and report back sometime. But I'm going to share the general observation that when Jesus heals someone, it's because they - or a family member - approach Jesus first.

[Jesus healing todos and GPS]

Jesus does not ride into town with his todo list all set to go, with the sickest people at the top of the list. Jesus does not have his GPS already programmed with healing waypoints arranged in an order that would put UPS to shame. Jesus seems to mainly do whatever comes naturally to him. He wanders around talking to people. And people come to Jesus and find their healing.

In our gospel today, a synagogue leader comes to ask for healing on behalf of his daughter. And the woman in the story approaches Jesus for her own sake. The two healing stories are different in many ways. With the little girl, Jesus had to go and visit the child. Jesus held her hand, spoke to her, and she was healed. More than that, she came back from the dead. So in a way, that's the more amazing story of the two.

But I think the story of the hemorrhaging woman is actually a more amazing healing. True, the “miracle” was less “miraculous”. Bringing someone back to life does seem - on the surface of it - like a bigger deal than helping someone stop hemorrhaging. How on earth could I think the healing of the hemorrhaging woman is more amazing? Perhaps I really do need a holiday. But here's my point. It's because in the story, the unnamed woman touches Jesus's clothing and is instantly healed. Jesus does not really seem to be involved in the process. He does - as the text says - “notice that power had gone out of him”. That's a pretty passive form of healing. Or, was it? The role that Jesus had is described as extremely passive. But what about the role of the woman herself?

The woman was not passive at all. She had been actively involved in her own healing - unsuccessfully - for many years. She had spent all her money - presumably on doctors, people offering miracle cures, and perhaps even on religious leaders. And it was the woman who decided that she had the faith to believe that touching Jesus's clothing would heal her. But more than that. Since the woman had been hemorrhaging for 12 years, based on the cultural traditions of her day, she would have been shunned by the entire community. And let's not forget that women were considered as less than human in her culture in any case. She was truly considered the lowest of the low. So when the woman decided to approach Jesus and to risk touching his clothing, she was completely engaged in her own healing. And she was utterly vulnerable.

[image: woman hemorrhaging]

Take a look at the image for this week. I must confess that when I was looking for an image this week, I didn't like any of the images I found online. Because they were all soaked in emotion. I'm a big believer in embracing our own emotions, but I don't like to push emotions on other people. I don't even like the current trend with children's movies where they use emotionally-charged music at strategic points in the story. Just in case we

don't realize that the crying heroin is upset or whatever. But for some reason, all of the images I found depicting this story were just dripping in emotion. All of the images of the woman approaching Jesus consistently displayed passion, desperation, vulnerability. I didn't want to use those images. They were too powerful. They were almost vulgar in their expression. And then it struck me. The images were right. I was wrong.

I was looking for something that is not possible. I just didn't want to face the raw emotion embedded in this story. I wanted to believe that healing - even personal healing - can be clean, simple, dignified, efficient. But as we all know, that's never how it works. I know that too of course, but sometimes we hope for things we know are impossible. And we can do that by simply not thinking about it. Personal healing can never be impersonal. Personal healing always requires vulnerability. Of course we know that. That was why I opened by saying that healing does sound like a lot of work.

So I am going to withdraw my previous criticism of the authors of the lectionary. This service is the last service of our regular season. We are heading into the summer months. And I realize that some of us will be in worship irregularly over those months. Some of you are probably not even here to hear this message today.

[image: sanctuary old and new]

So in actual fact, this is the perfect week to reflect on healing. Think back over the past year. One year ago, some of the people participating in worship today were completely unknown to us. One year ago, our staffing was different and we were preparing to say goodbye to Rev. Bill and getting ready to welcome Jane, who has now moved on herself. One year ago we were still discussing putting new flooring in the basement and refinishing the sanctuary floors. One year ago we did not have the A/V equipment to broadcast live worship from this sanctuary. One year ago our online church was running out of my basement. All of those things have changed in the last year.

And that's our corporate reality. Think back over the past year in our own personal lives too. Think of hopes, dreams, fears, joys that have changed in the last year. Some of us have moved from our family homes into retirement communities. Some of us have died. Some of us have gotten married. Some of us have stopped driving. And all of us have personal stories that nobody here even knows about. Don't worry, I'm not going to

ask you to share those stories. But I am going to ask all of us - including me - to think back over the last year. Reflect on any woundings you have given or received. Reflect on opportunities for healing that have arisen for you in the past year. Opportunities to give, or to receive, forgiveness. Reflect on that for just a moment.

[pause]

[image: freedom]

What are we going to do with those thoughts and feelings? Are we going to carry them into the summer with us and let them pollute our autumn? Or are we going to release our fears and angers now and have a truly liberating and restorative summer. I realize that some of us are retired, and perhaps summers look different to people after retirement. Before starting my summer holidays, I always clean my desk, and make sure my todo list is clean as well. If I leave tasks that nag at me it is harder to really “get away” for holidays.

But whether you are retired or not, it's the same thing with our relationships. If we leave any anger or frustration with others, it may nag at us. So to ensure a wonderful summer, I ask each of us to consider where we need to find healing before we try to get away. If we leave unfinished business, it is harder to get away. It is harder to feel peace. This is summarized well in the quote, “forgive others, not because they deserve it, but because you deserve peace.” And I assume we all want a peaceful summer.

When things go wrong in life, sometimes we can actually fix them. Fixing a problem is always the first thing to try. If you are upset with anyone, contact them and try to resolve it this week, before summer starts. Sometimes, problems can not be fixed so easily. Sometimes we need to have a conversation with a person who is no longer with us for example. Sometimes problems cannot be fixed because the solutions would simply be too expensive. When problems can't be fixed for some reason, then we have to consider forgiveness instead.

[image: forgiveness 1]

I believe that we as a society have trouble understanding real forgiveness. Many

of us have been permanently scared by stories such as “Love Story”, which preach that “love means never having to say you're sorry”. Which always struck me as odd. I figure if we love someone we would not hesitate to offer forgiveness when appropriate. Or think of the story of the child who prays to God for a new bicycle. But when the child's parent learns about it, the parent tells the child that God doesn't work that way. But the child knows that God is the source of forgiveness. So instead of praying for a bicycle, the child steals a bicycle and prays to God for forgiveness. Or consider the familiar sign in a convenience store that simply states: “Check cashing policy: to err is human, to forgive is \$40.” It's no wonder that we as a society don't really know how to forgive.

So what is forgiveness? Let's consider what it is not.¹

Forgiveness is *not* a feeling. Forgiveness is a decision. If you are waiting until you feel like forgiving someone, it may never happen. Forgiveness is a decision you - and only you - can make. And only you can decide when to do it.

Forgiveness is *not* condoning what the other person did. By forgiving someone you are not agreeing that the person's actions were “ok”.

Forgiveness is *not* pretending you were not hurt. If you had never been hurt, then forgiveness would not even be necessary. Forgiveness is about how *you* choose to live given your past (or even present) hurts.

Forgiveness is *not* forgetting. The idea that you need to “forgive and forget” is very dangerous. We are allowed to learn from our mistakes. We are allowed to not trust people who have proven that they are not trustworthy. Forgiveness is not an invitation to allow yourself to be wounded again.

Forgiveness is *not* taking away any responsibility from the other person. Even with forgiveness, the other person is still responsible to do their part of the work if they want to find their own freedom.

[image: forgiveness 2]

From my perspective, there are two basic problems with how we understand forgiveness. First of all, we often feel that forgiveness is for the benefit of the other person - usually the person who caused us pain in the first place. And secondly, we often

¹ adapted from <http://www.focusonthefamily.ca/faith-issues/personal-faith/forgiveness>

feel that forgiveness is about the past, that forgiveness is about somehow making the past “more fair”.

These ideas, combined, lead us to the idea that it is our “job” to withhold forgiveness from the other person until we feel they have suffered enough, or “learned their lesson”. And then, when *we* feel the other person is in the right space, *we* then grant them forgiveness. If that method actually worked, I might support it. But we all have personal stories where that just can’t happen. I mean, what if the other person is completely unaware of the issue that is weighing on us? They are not suffering. They are not “learning their lesson” no matter how long we wait. And moreover, why should we - the victims - be responsible for managing the person who caused us pain? The mistake we make is thinking that forgiveness is about the other person at all. Forgiveness is always about us - the person with the pain. And forgiveness is not about the past either - forgiveness is actually about the future - our future. Forgiveness is about us deciding how we will live our lives given the fact that the other person is still who they are.

Forgiveness is about the future, not the past, and it is about us, not the other person.

[image: woman haemorrhaging]

Which means that approaching forgiveness requires a lot of personal vulnerability - with ourselves. That is what the woman who was haemorrhaging was doing. Embracing her vulnerability to herself. Remember, it was only after her healing that anyone else even knew she was there. Prior to her healing, she was invisible to others.

Now, if this just sounds like a long-winded invitation to participate in our upcoming “Healing Circles for Forgiveness”, you are right! In those circles we will share with each other. And we will find healing together. All are welcome!

You deserve peace. You deserve to walk uninhibited into the summer. You deserve healing. Healing is possible. But just as with the woman in the story, the first step in healing is to recognize your own vulnerability, take a risk, and take the first step.

The woman said, “If I but touch Jesus’s clothes I will be healed” How would you finish the sentence, “If I but ... I will be healed”. Complete that sentence for yourself. And then go do it. You are worth it.

I wish you all a wonder-ful summer.

Amen.