
If I but touch ...
Chapel in the Park United Church
July 14, 2024
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Mark 5:21-43

I'm pretty sure that the authors of the lectionary did not 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 work. Don't people travel in the summer so that they don't have to deal with these sorts of things? 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. Or better yet, just walk out the door and we can start enjoying our Potluck Picnic right here.

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 runs 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.

There are numerous stories where Jesus heads into a new town. But there are absolutely no stories where Jesus rides 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 who are willing to be vulnerable 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 went to 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 Rev Paul think the healing of the hemorrhaging woman is more amazing?

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. 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 her 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.

Take a look at the sermon image in the bulletin this week. If you follow us on Instagram, it's the same image that I posted to Instagram this week. The image is in chit-chat too. I must confess that when I was looking for an image this week, I did not like any of the images I found. 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. For some reason, all of the images I found depicting this gospel story were just dripping in emotion. All of the images of the woman approaching Jesus consistently displayed

passion, desperation, vulnerability. I did not want to use any of 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 myself. I wanted to believe that healing - even personal healing - can be clean, simple, dignified, efficient. But as we all know, that is not how it works. I know that too of course, but sometimes we hope for things we know are impossible. And we can often do that by simply not really thinking about it at all. 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 sounds like a lot of work.

So I am going to withdraw my previous criticism of the authors of the lectionary. Because since it is now summer, today is a great chance to reflect on all the changes in the past 12 months. In actual fact, this is the perfect week to reflect on healing.

Think back over the past year and the life of this congregation. Some of the people participating in worship today were completely unknown to us one year ago. One year ago, only your search committee knew me. In fact, exactly 1 year ago you did meet Marjorie and me because we come to the service and the Picnic last year. I remember Rahul telling me that he hoped I would come back again.

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. Some of us have died. Some of us have significant changes in our medical situation. 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 now. But I am going to ask all of us - including me - to think back over the last year. And in particular, 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]

Now, 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. 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.

And it's the same thing with our relationships. If we leave any anger or frustrations we have, they will nag at us. So to ensure a wonderful summer, I ask each of us to consider where we need to find healing before we hit the heat of summer. If we leave unfinished business, it is harder to get away mentally and spiritually. 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 summer full of peace and joy.

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, while there is still lots of summer left. Sometimes, problems cannot be fixed so easily. Sometimes we want 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 personal problems cannot be fixed for some reason, then we have to consider forgiveness.

I believe that we as a society have trouble understanding 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 apologies and forgiveness to each other. 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 also what it is not.

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 to you. 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 (and perhaps present) hurts.

Forgiveness is not forgetting. The idea that you need to "forgive and forget" is very dangerous. Because 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 ourselves to be wounded all over 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 peace.

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 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 think the other person is in the right head space, we then grant them forgiveness. If that method actually worked, I might support it. But we all have personal stories where that just cannot 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.

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. She embraced her need for healing and then reached out to Jesus for help. And in that entire process, she found the healing she needed.

Now, if this just sounds like a long-winded invitation to participate in our upcoming "Healing Circles for Forgiveness", well it is. And everyone is welcome of course. But this message is more than that.

Because you deserve peace. You deserve to walk uninhibited into the remained of the summer. You deserve whatever healing you need. Healing is possible. But just like with the woman in the story, the first step in healing is to recognize your own need for healing. And to then embrace your vulnerability. Take a risk, and take the first step. This community is here to help.

Jesus said, "I come that you might have life, and have it abundantly." Whoever you are, you deserve peace.

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. Reach out to me if you want help with that. You are worth it.

I wish for us all the best of summers.

Amen.