

THE HEALING TOUCH

Scriptures: Matthew 9:18-26; 9:9-13

Last week we read two stories from Matthew's gospel where Jesus heals at a distance. A Roman army officer tells Jesus about his sick servant, and Jesus offers to come and heal him. But the Roman says, "You don't need to do that. Just say the word, and my servant will be healed." And he is. Then a Canaanite woman comes to Jesus begging him to heal her daughter. This time he does not even offer to see the girl. He says to the mother, "Be it done for you as you wish," and the girl is healed.

Clearly Jesus can heal people without even seeing them. But today's scripture reading is different. In today's scripture reading, Matthew places a huge emphasis on Jesus touching people. A leader of the synagogue comes to Jesus and says, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." How does Jesus respond? Does he say, "I don't need to come; I will just say the word and she will be healed." That is what Jesus did last week. But not this week. This week he goes to the girl's home and physically takes her hand.

Along the way, we have the story of the woman with the hemorrhage. The woman says to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." And she is. After going to great lengths to show us that Jesus can heal at a distance, why does Matthew now place so much importance on Jesus' touch?

Here is my theory. Why is Jesus' touch so important in this scripture? Because in both of these stories, the person Jesus touches unclean—ritually defiled under Jewish law. Leviticus 15:25 says, "If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time her [period], or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her [period], all the days of her discharge she shall continue in uncleanness. ... Every bed on which she lies during all the days of her discharge shall be treated as [unclean]. ... Everything on which she sits shall be unclean ... Whoever touches these things shall be unclean...."

I'll bet you never studied those verses in Sunday School. According to Old Testament law, the woman with the hemorrhage would have been considered unclean for twelve straight years. Anything she touched would have been contaminated—made unclean, and that of course includes any people she touched. But Jesus is different. The woman realizes—and how she came to this understanding we don't know—but the woman realizes that if she touches Jesus, the reverse will happen. Instead of contaminating Jesus, he will cleanse her. Instead of she making Jesus unclean by touching him, Jesus' touch will make her clean.

Then the same thing happens at the home of the synagogue leader. Jesus goes into the house to touch the body of a dead girl. According to Leviticus, touching a dead body made a person unclean. But Jesus does it anyway. He goes in, takes her by the hand, and raises her up. Instead of Jesus being defiled by the dead body, the body is cleansed and made alive by Jesus.

One more example. I mentioned this last week. At the beginning of Matthew 8 a man with leprosy comes to Jesus and says, “Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.” Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I do choose. Be made clean!”

I can tell you, Leviticus would not have approved of that. There are two whole chapters in Leviticus devoted to leprosy. That’s why I have never done a sermon series on Leviticus. There are two whole chapters in Leviticus devoted to leprosy, and Leviticus is quite clear than anyone touching a person with leprosy is contaminated.

There is a certain logic to these rules. In the ancient world before antibiotics, leprosy was a frighteningly disfiguring disease. And there was great fear of catching it through contact with someone who had it. In fact, when anyone in the ancient world died from an unknown illness, there was fear that in touching the body a person could pick up the disease.

Last week I was reading a book about the Protestant Reformation in Switzerland. When the plague broke out in Geneva in 1543, one of the Protestant pastors volunteered to go to the hospital to visit the sick. He soon died. The other pastors suddenly quit making hospital visits.

In the days before antibiotics it was not irrational to fear touching people who had died or who had leprosy or who had some disease that made them bleed for 12 years. Heck, we had to put out hand sanitizer just so people could pass the peace.

But here is the great surprise, the great twist. Jesus is not contaminated by the disease around him. He is the great decontaminator. By touching people Jesus does not pick up their uncleanness. Instead he gets rid of it.

This is also true when it comes to moral uncleanness. In our first scripture reading Jesus goes to a dinner that Matthew throws for his tax collector friends and other assorted sinners. The Pharisees are scandalized. They say to the disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” It is the same idea as touching a dead body or someone with leprosy. If Jesus associates with sinners, he will be defiled. Their sin will rub off on him.

Isn’t that a legitimate fear? Don’t you parents worry about the kind of friends your children have? Don’t you worry about the kind of people with whom they associate? You are afraid that their sin will rub off on them, that your children will be contaminated by their habits and values. The Pharisees weren’t stupid. Touching people with certain diseases could make you sick. Hanging out with certain people could mess up your life. They knew how things worked in this world.

I once read a corollary of Murphy’s law called Schopenhauer’s law of entropy. It says, “If you put a spoonful of wine in a barrel of sewage, you get sewage. And if you put a spoonful of sewage in a barrel of wine, you get sewage.”

That is how sin works. It is like disease. If you put a healthy person in with a sick person, the healthy person gets sick. If you put a good kid in with some bad kids, the good kid gets corrupted.

But not in the case of Jesus. In Jesus Schopenhauer's law is reversed. If you let Jesus touch you, it is not Jesus who will be contaminated by your sin, your disease, your messed up life. It is you who will be decontaminated by Jesus.

And that is why we are doing a service of wholeness in our worship service this morning. In a few moments I will invite any of you who desire Jesus' healing for your life or the life of someone you care about, to come forward and receive prayer and anointing with oil—a quiet private prayer and a little bit of olive oil put on your forehead. This is not some new idea. It is an ancient practice in the church going all the way back to the book of James. There is even a service for it in the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship. Believe me, if there is a service for it in the Presbyterian Book of Worship, it can't be weird.

This is not some magic ritual. Do you remember what happened when the woman with the hemorrhage touched Jesus' cloak? Jesus turned around and said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." It was not the touching that made the woman well. It was her faith in Jesus. Can Jesus hear your prayer without touching you, without anointing you with oil? Of course. As we saw last week, Jesus can heal at a distance.

But here is the good news: Jesus wants to touch you personally. Jesus wants to touch you to show you that you are not too sick for Jesus. You are not too unclean for Jesus. Neither you nor your family is too messed up for Jesus. Through anointing with oil Jesus wants to touch you with his power to transform your life, to make you whole, even if the disease or problem you face does not go away.

Jesus is the reverse of Schopenhauer's law. If a teaspoon of sewage makes a barrel of wine into sewage, a teaspoon of Jesus can make sewage into wine.

- Ken Onstot
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