

## Reaching Out, Touching Me, Touching You

Lamentations 3:22-33

Crossroads Christian Church

Mark 5:21-43

June 28, 2015 Pentecost 5 B

Pop culture trivia time: Look in your bulletins. See the sermon title. Where does it come from?<sup>i</sup>

Reaching out and touching me, touching you. That's more than just good lines in a song. Imagine back to when you were a baby, and you cried out from hunger or fear or loneliness, and your mother or father reached out to pick you up, cuddle you, feed you, change you. Remember your first time riding a bicycle and your big brother or parent ran alongside, touching, helping you keep balance. Remember when you came down the aisle at church after the sermon and you gave your confession of faith and received the right hand of fellowship. Remember a time when you were dating and were just starting to get serious, and your hand and your date's hand hesitantly touched, drew back, then touched again and your fingers laced together. Then, later, maybe with the same person, maybe with another, your hands were joined with your beloved's, as you repeated your wedding vows. Remember your team gathering in a group hug after winning the big game. Remember a time when you were in grief and a friend or relative, their own eyes wet with tears, reached out and touched your shoulder, or embraced you in a hug. Reaching out, touching me, touching you.

Human touch is a powerful thing. In contrast to all the beautiful touches that I described, inappropriate touch or reaching out with a clenched fist can be terribly destructive. Stories of rape, clergy sexual abuse, spousal or child battering, all remind us that we need to be careful not to cross boundaries, to respect other people and treat them with respect and care.

When you listened to the scripture readings, you heard about God's love reaching out to touch and heal and bring life, and about people reaching out to ask for healing and life.

In the Hebrew Scriptures you heard the words of a prophet whose people had been hauled off into exile. The nation's dreams seemed dead; indeed, the nation was dead and its people were strangers in a strange land. The book of Lamentations has such a sad name, and you expect it to be a totally depressing read. And there are searing and painful sections that are just that. But after all the dislocation and tragedy, the prophet discovers that God is still there, and that God still cares. Sometimes we make too easy contrasts between the harsh, stern judging God of the Hebrew Scriptures and the loving, compassionate God of the New Testament. But they're the same God. Perceptions of different writers are different, but they're still the

same God. The God described here in Lamentations is a God of steadfast love and forgiveness, just like the God of Jesus Christ. After the sermon we'll be singing that wonderful old hymn, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness"? This passage is where the hymn came from.

The prophet says, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." The songwriter sings, "Great is thy faithfulness, Great is thy faithfulness, Morning by morning new mercies I see; all I have needed thy hand provided—Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!" This God may sometimes bring grief, but more important, more true to his nature, is that "he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone." (vs. 33) A God of love that never gives out—a God of compassion that never ends—that is the God of Jesus Christ.

And so we come to our Gospel lesson, and today you get two stories for the price of one! The stories are woven together, one interrupting the other. Two people reached out to Jesus. Jairus, the man who asked for Jesus to heal his daughter was the respected lay leader of a local synagogue. Often, in places where there is a high infant mortality rate, parents would not let themselves get too attached to their children, for it was likely that many of them would die in childhood. Also, in that and many other ancient societies, girls weren't valued as much as boys. But neither of that mattered to Jairus. The only thing that mattered to Jairus was that his beloved little girl was sick and dying. He fell at Jesus' feet, not worrying about his own reputation or his own dignity, and pleaded with Jesus, please, please, please let his little girl live and be made well. So Jesus agreed, and began to follow Jairus.

Following the desperate father's lead, Jesus and his followers started on the road to the house where Jairus lived and his little girl was dying. But Jesus had a reputation, and the crowds eagerly pressed around, hoping to see a miracle.

What they didn't see, or if they saw her, they winced and moved away because she was unclean, was a thin, pale, anemic woman moving toward Jesus. She was a woman with a backstory. She had lived with bleeding, with hemorrhages, for twelve years, as long as the dying little girl had been alive. Primitive medical care hadn't helped; it had made matters worse. Her bleeding made her ritually unclean—to touch her would be to become unclean, unfit to worship without going through elaborate rituals. For her to touch anyone would be seen as a bad thing to do, a breaking of a deep cultural taboo. But she was so tired, so tired, and so in hope that Jesus had the power of God in him to heal her, that she had to try. Down on her knees,

she reached out as he passed by, and her hand touched the hem of his robe, maybe the prayer tassels that observant Jews wore on the hems of their robes. Maybe she was hoping that no one would notice, that she could be healed just by the power of holiness around Jesus.

But she did reach out. She did touch. He did notice. "Who touched my clothes?" He asked. It must have sounded like a ridiculous question, in the midst of a jostling crowd where there was much pushing and shoving. He looked around and saw the poor, thin, anemic woman, trembling in fear. She fell down before him and told him her story, how she had this terrible chronic disease that made her waste away, and how just with a touch of his garment, she just knew that she was healed. And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

Can you imagine what Jairus must have been thinking? His own daughter was dying, every minute counts, and Jesus stops to chat with an unclean woman who could just have well been healed later? Can't you just see the anxiety, maybe the anger, the grief on his face? "Hurry up, Jesus," he might have been thinking, the words forming silently on his lips. "Please, just hurry up!" His worst fears were realized as they came near his house. He saw it on their faces as he approached; before they could say those terrible words "Your daughter is dead; why trouble the teacher any further," he must have just known. The air went out of his lungs. The light went out of his eyes as tears filled them.

But Jesus said, "Do not fear, only believe." Remember last week's Gospel, when after calming the storm, Jesus said to the disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" They're pretty much the same words, the same idea, all about the tension between fear and faith, but in such a different context. Here they weren't words of gentle rebuke, they were words of hope—a way of saying, don't give up yet.

The crowds, including johnny-on-the-spot professional mourners, were wailing their songs of grief. Everyone was crying. A child was dead. And Jesus allowed no one to follow him except his closest friends and disciples—Peter, James, and John. "Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead, but sleeping," and the crowd went from loud noises of lamentation to loud, cynical laughter. What a charlatan, they must have thought. Just another phony faith healer.

Jesus sent them all outdoors, and was alone with the still child and her father and mother. He reached out to her, took her by the hand, and said to her, "Talitha, cum," which means in Aramaic, "Little girl, get up." She got up and began to walk around. She wasn't just healed, she was brought back to life.

An unclean woman had reached out to Jesus and was healed by her faith; Jesus reached out and took the hand of a dead child and raised her from the dead. Reaching out, touching me, touching you.

Not all sick people are healed; few dead children are resuscitated. But we still worship a Savior who invites us to choose faith over fear; who invites us to reach out in love, trusting that God reaches out, too, so that we can receive the tender touch of God's compassion, of God's steadfast love. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

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<sup>i</sup> (Neil Diamond, Sweet Caroline)