THE POWER OF TOUCH

Proper 8, Year B: 2 Corinthians 8:7-15
Psalm 30
Mark 5:21-43

Rainey G. Dankel
Trinity Church Boston
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Key Passages: Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” (Mark 5:30)

On this Sunday approaching the 4th of July, it is natural to think about what it means to enjoy freedom in this country. On July 4, 1776, the colonists declared their independence from the British crown, setting forth a litany of abuses they had suffered at the hands of the English government. In declaring their separation, they asserted that “all men are endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights …to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Of course they didn’t really mean “all men,” uttering these words as settlers on lands stolen from Native Americans and 157 years after the first enslaved Africans were brought to their shores. Of course they did mean “some white men,” not including women who had no such rights.

So, following a bloody war, those white men did become free of English rule. And they created a system of laws and privileges that we are still trying to extend to “all humans in our midst.” We have much more work to do.

Yesterday I walked in the hot sun with thousands of Bostonians who know just how far we have to go. We were protesting the inhumane treatment of refugees and immigrants, especially the separation of children from their parents as we invoke our legal powers to exercise cruelty in the name of security. I think of these terrified children and their distraught parents, powerless to stop the suffering we are inflicting on them as they try to escape from violent and repressive circumstances.

I see the suffering of those parents and children, and I turn to today’s Gospel. Mark gives us two stories of healing, the child of a leader in the synagogue and a woman suffering from long-term illness. It is a study in power and compassion that should both comfort and challenge us today.

Mark’s narrative device of interspersing two stories contributes to the sense of urgency in Jesus’ ministry. There isn’t enough time to complete one mission when another intervenes. Not to put too fine a point on it, but often this is the life of a clergy person. I am trying to write a sermon in the comparative calm of a Saturday, and suddenly I find I am called to participate in a rally. I leave my
computer mid-sentence and go to see what God may be up to, the better to be able to speak with you today. Among the many signs people were carrying, I was interested to see how many contained expressions and quotations from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim sources urging us to care for children and immigrants.

In Mark’s case, these interwoven stories often illuminate each other, and that is certainly the case here. We begin with Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, who falls at Jesus’ feet, begging him to come heal his daughter who is at the point of death. Jesus goes with Jairus, with a large crowd pressing around him. We learn that there is a woman in the crowd who has been ill for 12 years and has been impoverished by ineffective medical treatments. She believes that Jesus can heal her if she can but touch his clothes.

Suddenly Jesus realizes that he has been touched and he stops to ask who it is. The disciples think this is a foolish question, but the woman knows he is speaking of her. She kneels before Jesus, and he assures her that her faith has healed her. We then learn that Jairus’ daughter has died, but Jesus proceeds with his mission, saying that the girl is only sleeping. In the presence of the girl’s parents and his closest disciples, Jesus gently takes her by the hand and lifts her up from the bed.

One common thread is in these two stories is desperation and powerlessness in the face of illness. Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, a man of power in his community, comes to Jesus in a posture of humility to plead for help for his daughter. In contrast to so many other stories in the gospels, where religious authorities are at odds with Jesus, Jairus sets aside any such issues in his frantic search for help for his daughter.

The hemorrhaging woman is also desperate. She has become impoverished after unsuccessful treatments and she is isolated by her illness. Alone in the crowd, she presses toward Jesus for the healing that she believes can come even from the clothes he is wearing. She is willing to risk humiliation as she seeks relief from her suffering.

Perhaps you have known this desperation, for your own health or for that of someone you love. You have shared such experiences with me. And I have had my own. My husband was in intensive care for three months with raging postsurgical infections that ultimately took his life. Despite the best medical treatment that seemed to be available, many procedures, countless tests, the latest drugs literally flown in from elsewhere, and the constant attention of his loved ones, he did not survive. I felt helpless every day. It was excruciating.

Illness can be a great leveler. We may be different in class, wealth, education, social status, gender, race, and religion. But when we are struck by illness, those other differences seem not to matter if they can’t bring us the healing we
are desperately seeking. So when Jesus’ compassion is freely extended to all those in this story—the powerful as well as the powerless—we learn something important.

Jesus doesn’t set up criteria or screening devices for those seeking his help. He doesn’t decide who is “worthy” of healing. He doesn’t seem concerned that he may be encouraging “bad behavior” by offering healing. He doesn’t look for successful cases that will burnish his reputation. In fact, he makes these encounters as personal and private as possible, deliberately avoiding the magician label that was common currency among the charlatans of his day. Jesus’ “entry requirement” is a humble request for help, based on trust in Jesus rather than reliance on one’s own sense of entitlement. Those who are healed by Jesus are those who recognize his true power, not their own.

One of the reasons illness is so challenging to many of us is that we are used to being in control. This is particularly true of those of us who are white Americans. We enjoy the results of a system of privileges baked into our country’s history. We believe that our own skills and hard work, along with those of our forebears, have produced the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness that are our birthright. We benefit from a meritocracy whose criteria we have arranged, consciously and unconsciously. And when we are threatened by those who challenge this unearned privilege, we set up systems to reduce the threats to our status and our security.

This fall the Anne Berry Bonnyman Symposium will focus on immigration. In particular, we are interrogating our troubled history as a country, trying to understand how racism and white privilege underlie our policies and laws. Today’s Gospel provides some important lessons for us in this analysis. Jesus offers healing to people of great privilege and people of no status. This is consistent with the overall portrayal of Jesus as one who moves across boundaries and offers the love, forgiveness, and mercy of God to all kinds of people.

Jesus claims no privilege for himself and he urges his disciples to understand that his power derives from the love of God set loose in the world. As Paul says in today’s letter to the Corinthians, “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich,” (2 Corinthians 8:9). The emptying of Christ, the setting aside of the privilege of the Divine Son, urges us to examine our own sense of privilege and find the humility to acknowledge our dependence on God’s mercy, rather than our entitlement to God’s favor.

Jesus comes close to us, reaching out a hand to lift us out of despair, offering the healing power of God’s love, in whatever situation we may find ourselves. It is as we give up our sense of control and power that we find ourselves in God’s merciful hands. And it is in examining our sense of our own privilege that we
discover Jesus’ self-emptying compassion as the model for our human relationships.

When we see Jesus reaching out to lift up the dying child, we cannot escape the pictures of children torn from their parents, with no one to comfort them. We know the trauma inflicted on them, thrust alone and helpless into a completely chaotic future, unable to trust the adults around them. Who is extending a hand of comfort to them? As we exercise our power to detain and incarcerate their parents, we seek to preserve our own sense of security, without compassion for the suffering we are inflicting.

As a nation that claims to be founded on life and liberty, we have repeatedly failed to resolve how to extend those blessings to all who come to our shores, whether in chains of forced labor, or escaping oppression and violence, or seeking economic and political opportunity for themselves and their children. We have held tight to our power and privilege, thinking that our compassion must be earned by people in desperate circumstances. We have forgotten what it means to be dependent on God’s mercy.

On this day when we celebrate our independence as a country, let us not forget what it means to experience the compassion of Jesus. As we beg for God’s merciful touch when we are in need, may we become more aware how our own grasping for power inflicts suffering on others. May we see Jesus’ touch as powerful in its expression of mercy and compassion, not an iron fist of coercion and control. May we find the courage and wisdom to help extend Jesus’ hands of healing into the troubling circumstances around us. May we find the true meaning of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” as God’s plan for all people.