

Touching the Hem— A perspective on Communion

February 16, 2020

Bodily healing, bodily connection and bodily memory

Text: Mark 5: 21-43

I'd like you to do something unusual for a moment please:

This will work best if you can do it with a person you are not very familiar with.

Lean forward touch the coat of the person in the pew ahead of you.

If there is no one ahead of you, but someone behind, allow yourself to feel their touch.

How did it feel? Awkward?

Its a pretty bold gesture, isnt it? Touching a stranger is something we avoid. Children can get away with it, but adults can't. Now imagine you were not just touching, but imagine yourself wanting something from the person ahead of you. Think about tugging their sleeve.

Even bolder for an adult to do.

The woman's gesture is like that. She is sick with a permanent menstrual flow that will not stop. We dont know her name. Mark tells us that she suffered a lot, and spend every penny on medical help- without success. She is broke. She is weak, from anemia, she is ostracized by her community as permanently unclean; and she may well have had marital trouble or been divorced since she has not been able to bear children for 12 years. Her suffering is complex and multilayered.

Because she has tried everything else, she can either give up or be bold.

She chooses to be bold. She tries to get close to the famous healer. Should a woman approach a strange man in public? No, not in her culture. Should a woman touch a strange man in public? Absolutely not in her culture.

But she does it, saying to herself, He may not even need to know I did it, if only I touch the hem of his garment I may get healed. And she touches the hem of his garment.

Immediately her body responds to her gesture, it seems like the body knew whose garment she touched, and absorbed the healing power of the Christ.

But then something even more remarkable happens: Despite the large crowd pressing in on him, Jesus too feels a change in his body. That "power had gone out from him" he can feel and he wants to know where it went. When finally he sees the trembling woman he is not at all angry. He affirms her touch. He calls her tenderly "daughter": "Your faith has healed you".

Faith? " Your bravery, your daring faith, your gutsiness has healed you." Just as in the story of the friends who uncover the roof to get their paralyzed friend to Jesus, faith is the courageous and gutsy act to reach out. People who feel unworthy do overcome their shyness and reach out to get healing and help from Jesus. That is the faith he affirms.

Touch and bodies are paramount though in this story.

The healing is not effected by word, but by touch and a transfer of bodily energy .

And this brings me to the importance of the sacrament we celebrate today. Communion is about touch isnt it? And does not "my body" rank paramount in Communion? And do not our bodies become involved in the act of communion as well?

You see in an average worship hour everything is expected to happen through words and music.

Worship is words and music. A lot for the ears. A little for the eyes (thinking of the flowers, the bulletin, the candle), very little for hands and feet (standing, turning pages) In Sunday worship there is a lot for the mind, but very little for the body.

When you think that in worship we are here to connect with one another and with God, we are here to remember Jesus in such a way that this memory becomes alive in our day to day actions...isnt it odd, that so much of what we do in worship is only words?

But Jesus taught, you will say, and aren't the gospels written, for us to hear? You are right there....but think about the stories we've been hearing since Christmas:

The stable, the star. The waters of baptism and the heat of the desert. The healings of people with mental and physical illnesses. One after the other. Bodies recovered, souls became whole, lives were re-claimed.

What did Jesus do when he was not healing? Yes, sure he preached and taught, but he also ate a lot. He liked food! And he liked to share that food in company, in a way that was joyful and made people feel whole and happy.

Do you like dinner parties? Or pot lucks? I love them! I find eating in community rejuvenating; that is if people engage with you, and not just shove the food into themselves. You come home,and you met someone you did not know well, you spoke to several people, you feel reconnected to your community, right?

Jesus critics called him a glutton and a wine bibber. He was supposed to be this man of God and he enjoyed his food?

But Jesus never ate alone. He prayed alone. But he always ate in company. He drew all those characters who would normally never meet each other into a table fellowship. Lepers, tax collectors, teachers and students, "fallen women"; lawyers, and homemakers...you name it. The last supper is the last of these. Special because it was the last one. Special because it happened on the night of the Passover holiday feast and because Jesus said special words and asked us to remember. But it was not something altogether different. It was the last of these meals with wine and food, and quirky company. One of those meals during which Jesus made it clear: THIS is what the kingdom of God will be like.

So how do we best remember Jesus in worship?

I have a Christmas cookie recipe that no one loves as much as I do. I love it because it reminds me of my childhood Christmasses with aunts and uncles who have all died since. I make the cookies for myself, my new family finds them "ok". But those cookies are a kind of sacrament for me...I can taste in them the grace of the loving family I grew up in. A smell and taste can evoke amazing memories stronger than a word. A touch can move us to tears where words didn't. The most bodily way I can remember my grandmother, aunts and uncles is to make and eat those cookies.

Communion is our bodily remembrance of the way Jesus lived and showed the kingdom of God. It is so important that we call it a mysterium, a sacrament in the church. What does that mean?

In the 5th century the famous north African theologian Augustine of Hippo came up with a definition of what a sacrament is(most churches still hold to this definition to day:)

A sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible Grace or an outward sign of an inward grace. In communion we touch, and we taste. We say: "taste and see how good God is".

Communion then is the visible sign (a meal) of the invisible grace. The grace is the totally accepting, healing community of the kingdom of God, where Jesus is the host, into which we are invited.

Because of that communion in the early church was always connected with a real meal, and one sat at a table. But for logistical reasons the church seems to have moved the communion into a separate realm from regular meals as early as the 2nd century. Even Paul had already something to say about that, Its difficult to get a large number of Christians to eat together at one table. , Communion seems to have been celebrated with a buffet style meal in memory of Jesus. Apostle Paul mentions that as early as 22 years after Jesus' death and resurrection there were problems with the meal and communion together. Privileged people seem to have eaten the best foods first and more than they need and the dockworkers, who had to work late shifts, only got the leftovers.

It is probably again time for a major communion reform.

Many of us do not understand the sacrament any more, feel unworthy to partake, or feel nothing when they do partake.

And that is sad, because communion's intention is to literally feed soul and body.

So small house churches are popping up again, and in New York city dinner churches have begun to fill a void for many seekers.

We began with remembering how Jesu's body poured out strength which then flowed into the woman's body, healing her ailment. All because the woman made the first step...if I only touch the hem of his garment....she thought.

In communion we touch bread, and we touch a cup and taste the fruit of the wine.

We touch that of which Jesus said "this is my body."

The mind can not analyze what happens here, the mystery should stay mystery of our communion with the Risen Christ.

Yes, communion is a bold action, and perhaps as awkward for some of us as it was to touch your pew neighbours sleeve. We break bread and share a cup and doing this we expect the Risen Christ to be present under these elements of bread and wine, wheat and grapes. That is pretty bold as well, isnt it? God in the earthy ordinariness of the fields and the product of human labour, declaring it sacred...It is a bold action, this celebration , indeed.

But Jesus saw the woman's determinatinon to touch him and he praised and affirmed her.

As you boldly touch bread and cup in the celebration of Communion you touch the hem of Christ's garment.

You dont touch Christ. You touch the hem. And you are welcome, and Jesus calls you "daughter" or "son" or simply "blessed".