

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL  
July 1, 2012

*"Healing Touch"*

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.

Texts - 2 Samuel 1: 17-27  
; Mark 5: 21-43

Suzanne—her real name—is a woman in her late 30s or early 40s. A year or so ago, she discovered that her breast cancer had returned. She decided to have a double mastectomy. After much consultation and soul searching, she also decided that she did not want to undergo reconstruction. She came to realize that her identity was not bound up in whether she had breasts or not.

One thing she did want, though, was to have some kind of healing service. She didn't really know what that would look like, but she wanted friends to gather around her the week that the surgery was scheduled.

So, on a Sunday morning in the hour before the main Eucharist, a number of us gathered in the chapel with Suzanne. Many of us were from the church, but other friends came, too. Someone brought a wonderful chair. It was light weight, sort of like a large lawn chair. It reclined all the way back and had a footstool. We placed the chair right in front of the communion rail, and Suzanne climbed in and leaned back. We all surrounded her and spent quite a long time in silence, in prayer, and in the laying on of hands. It was with great reluctance that we brought this time to an end.

In a week like this past one, we know that there were people from this community gathered at a bedside or at the end of telephones awaiting news of the end of a loved one's life and then gathering again to celebrate Dick Alexander's life. Just like King David who wept over the deaths of Saul and his best friend Jonathan, we lamented.

There were others--people we knew only through their creative contributions to our world. Nora Ephron. And those we knew not at all. Their deaths or critical injuries came to our attention because of senseless violence and tragedy, like Mollie and Mary, two young women in relationship with one another who were shot in the head. Or those whose names we don't even know who lost lives or homes or health because of storms, floods, and fires.

Each Sunday, in our Prayers of the People, there are petitions for healing and comfort for friends and loved ones struggling with disease. Once in a while there is joy in a report of healing—a remission or a clean slate following chemotherapy. When this happens, we are likely to say that our prayers were answered. But often, this is not so. The pain continues or death comes. Then, what do we say?

That is when the questions come. Why? Why this one and not someone else? Why weren't our prayers answered? Wasn't God paying attention?

Miracle stories like today's Gospel make it seem easy in some respects. If you just have enough faith and ask Jesus, you are healed. The blind man, the lepers, the paralytic whose friends lower him through the roof to reach Jesus. The centurion whose son is healed from afar just by Jesus' words. And in today's reading, a prominent man whose daughter is dying and a bleeding woman. We may be tempted to read these stories looking for clues—some kind of a formula for getting the prayers right, getting the healing to happen. Barbara Brown Taylor says,

Two parts prayer, three parts faith, and one part good works. We comb the miracle stories to find out who did what right and who did what wrong so we can learn from their experience....Only most of the time that's hard to do because God rarely does anything the same way twice.

One of the problems with this kind of thinking is that it can end up blaming the one who is praying. If you just had enough faith...if you just prayed hard enough or often enough.... We get confused about what causes the miracles. We think we are in control—by trying harder we can get God's attention, as if God were some kind of cosmic vending machine. And the reality that people we love do suffer and die makes us wonder what the point of stories like this might be.

I think these stories are glimpses of what God is like and of God's Kingdom—the world as God would wish it to be for us. But the world is not as God would wish, for many reasons. And the story we have today with its two miracles will show us more than simply physical healings if we peer below the surface. More about God and the Kingdom.

It is another of Mark's "sandwich" stories. The outside layers about Jairus and his plea for his dying daughter surround the middle of the sandwich—the interruption by the woman on the way to Jairus' house. Jairus is a man of power and wealth. We are told that he is a leader in the synagogue. And that is the first hint of what is going on here.

Doesn't it seem odd that a synagogue leader would seek out someone like Jesus? Get down on his knees and beg? It would seem dangerous, in fact, as Jesus and his teachings have not been popular with the religious authorities. Jairus could be endangering his reputation and position by doing this. Yet, all of his money, his influence, his prestige have not been able to save his daughter. Jairus is a desperate man—a man with everything to lose. So, he takes the risk and Jesus agrees to go with him to lay hands upon the young girl.

We can imagine him walking down the road, wanting more than anything to run, impatient at the pace of Jesus and all those following along. Probably wanting to shout, "hurry, please hurry!" This is an urgent mission.

Imagine then, when Jesus stops in his tracks because he feels the touch of a woman – a miscellaneous woman without a name who has no right to approach him. This woman is unclean – an untouchable – because for twelve years she has been bleeding. The Levitical holiness code considered blood to be the life force, so any loss of blood was unholy.

In approaching Jesus, she has broken more than one taboo – coming into this crowd of people instead of staying on the fringes where she belongs and touching a strange man, even though it was just his clothing. But just as Jairus has everything to lose, this woman has nothing to lose. In addition to having spent every penny on unsuccessful cures, she has already lost everything – family, friends, her belonging in the community because she is unclean. She has nothing more to lose, so, in desperation, she takes the risk and is healed.

And as if the healing were not enough, Jesus stops, demanding to know who has touched him. When she confesses and he calls her, “Daughter,” she is restored to wholeness, to the community, to relationship from which she has been separated for more than a decade. She is healed in body, to be sure, but perhaps more importantly, she is no longer shamed and shunned. She is healed in her identity as a person, beloved of God.

Of course, as this drama has played out, Jairus’ daughter has died. It is too late for healing, for laying on of hands. And yet, it is not too late for Jesus. He says, “Do not fear, only believe.” “Trust me.” To the incredulous mourners, He says, “The child is not dead, only sleeping.” And he goes to her, takes her by the hand and tells her to rise. And when she does, he instructs her parents to give her something to eat.

In this story, then, we see what God is like, what God’s Kingdom is like, through the actions of Jesus. For Jesus, there is no priority of the rich and important over the poor and marginalized. He holds out his hand to both, touching them, even though doing so would spread that uncleanness to him. No, through God’s healing grace, the unclean is cleansed, life in all its fullness is restored.

Something else has happened to our world this week. The Supreme Court decisions. I do not expect that we will all be in agreement on this, but I would ask you to ponder the model Jesus has set before us – how the rich and the poor, the important and the invisible are to share in the Kingdom.

Where is God in healing? Where is God when healing does not seem to happen? There are no simple answers, no formulas. But we do know that God is present, no matter what. We do know that God beckons us toward the Kingdom. We get but glimpses from time to time. Perhaps healing is broader and wider than being cured. Perhaps healing comes in ways we cannot understand just now. Perhaps we are called to extend a hand to the suffering, to touch the dying and the outcast, to bring a measure of comfort and peace.

Is healing dependent on the amount of faith we have? Were Jairus and the unnamed woman faithful? I'm not convinced that they were. Desperate – yes. Willing to choose, to reach out, ask, and risk – yes. Willing to hope – yes.

And maybe that's what it is all about. Hope and assurance in that God who does not turn away. Who wants all to be whole and who weeps when we are not.

And then, there is the community. No miracle cure took place in the healing service with Suzanne. Her surgery was not called off. All traces of cancer had not disappeared. She went through the surgery, the rehab, and the recovery. But I'm betting that she would say the healing service made a difference. Surrounded as she was by the community that loved her, that supported her then and through the entire ordeal, and that were as Christ to her.

This is what we are called to do. To care for those among us – and to step beyond our red doors to do whatever we can to assure that all of God's people may find wholeness and healing.

Amen and amen.