



North Shore  
**Congregational  
Church**  
FOX POINT, WI

*From the Pulpit...*

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## ***“Separation, Isolation, and the Power of a Touch”***

**Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching**

*Mark 1: 40-45; Mark 5: 21-34*

*July 28, 2019*

This is one of the more familiar characters, or at least stories, that is included in our series this summer. Unlike Ahithopel (who was unknown to most all of us at the time), or some of the others we've tackled, many of us are at least somewhat familiar with this woman's story. For the sake of our series, however, I really tried to take that story in from her perspective, and her experience. Looking at this course of events through her eyes, there's a lot she might have to say for the life of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian.

There is her example of tenacity and fortitude. This is a woman who has been trapped in a cycle of desperation for over a decade. She's spent everything she had trying to find healing. I think the use of the word 'physicians,' here, gives us a different idea than what she was really dealing with. These weren't graduates of Johns Hopkins with specialties in obstetrics and hematology. Some of the treatments at the time were worse than the maladies themselves, and this woman had gone from one to the next, spending everything she had, enduring every painstaking therapy, in an attempt to get better. Nothing worked! She had every reason to give up – but she didn't! We could learn from that.

There is her example of faith and trust. 'If only I can just get a touch of his cloak!' There's an almost mystical sense to her perspective here, but her conviction is clear. Despite every failed treatment, despite years of disease and disillusion, she was convinced that Jesus could be the answer to her needs, and she trusted in his capacity to bring healing to her life. We could learn from that.

There are number of lessons that this woman's voice can speak to our contemporary lives of faithfulness, but I have to say that it was that touch, that moment of reaching out to Jesus, that spoke the loudest. You can almost imagine the moment. Word of Jesus has been spreading like wildfire. Far and wide people are hearing of this Nazarene carpenter who is working miracles. There are stories of changing water to wine, cleansing the lepers, healing the ill, even restoring the dead to life – and the people can't get to him fast enough. As he walks through town the crowds start clamoring around him. People are pressed upon people who are pressed upon more until Jesus disappears into the sea of onlookers trying to get a glimpse, moment, just a word with this man of miracles.

In the midst of that sea of humanity is this woman so ill she can barely walk. She muddles her way through the crowd – being pushed about, shoved aside, probably even stepped on here or there. Finally, she gets close enough and you can picture her outstretched arm sliding between the people in front of her...her fingers reaching as far as they can...as she just grazes the cloak of the man she's so desperately sought to touch...and it's that touch, that contact, that moment of engagement with Jesus, that begins her healing and restores her life. But, here's the thing that makes that moment, that touch, even more remarkable – she shouldn't have even been there!

There are a lot of things this woman would have endured in her illness. There are countless physical repercussions and symptoms she most certainly would have experienced. She went through those nameless treatments and found herself impoverished due to the expense. But, at the same time she was suffering all of those trials, she also would have been completely and entirely ostracized from her community!

There are few things in the world of ancient Judaism that played a higher role in society than that of maintaining purity and cleanliness. Look through the catalog of laws in the Jewish code and you will see how many of them surround the notion of being physically and ritually clean. There were both physical and spiritual motivations behind it all, but maintaining ritual purity was at the heart of the Jewish experience. In that context, then, those like this woman, and the leper we read about in Mark 1, would have been completely set aside from society for that very reason. These were, literally, the untouchables. You didn't get near them. You didn't offer them the time of day. You didn't risk in any way their impurity somehow compromising you!

So, back to our woman, she's now had 12 years of this. In the midst of her ailing, throughout her weakness, as she endured the treatments, she was also completely cut off from the world around her. She wasn't part of the religious gatherings. She wasn't at the table for the sabbath meals. She wasn't being held by her husband or children at night. She was alone – and I have to imagine that was the worst part of it all!

As humans, we are built for relationship. We crave connection. We long for interaction. We desire the loving touch of another to help provide us with that sense of fullness and joy in life. Whether we are introverts or extroverts...whether we are the life of the party or the quiet one in the corner...we all yearn for a tangible connection with others. There is little more emotionally painful and destructive to the human psyche than to isolate us. We want to be in relationship. We are built to be in relationship. The countless medical studies leave little ambiguity in this question: be it platonic, biological or romantic – there are few things more important to our overall wellbeing than the relationships we hold.

So, that brings me back to our woman. Try to imagine her circumstance. We don't know how old she was, but we know this has been an issue for her for 12 years. So, what we do know is that this was not a life-long issue. This type of thing wouldn't have been. Did it come upon her at 15? 25? We don't know. But, we do know that she used to know what a life of fullness and relationship looked like. She had that! Family, friends, sabbath dinners and religious services – that was her reality up to and until this malady took over her life. And then, as if out of nowhere, she would have been cut off from it all. Separated...isolated...alone!

That was the power of this touch. She shouldn't have even been in the crowd that day. She shouldn't have been among all of those people, and many would have tried to cast her aside if they saw her there. She was unclean. She was untouchable. She shouldn't have been anywhere near this group of people, much less Jesus himself. But, all she wants is that touch, that connection, that relationship that might finally bring some healing into her broken, pain-stricken, solitary existence.

Now, as I mentioned before, there is a certain mystical nature to her understanding of how all this will play out – and the miracle of healing itself is certainly worth the attention that it usually gets in reading this story. But, what stood out to me was that touch. Jesus was willing to be touched by the untouchable. Both in this story, and in that of leper we shared from Mark 1, Jesus was willing to engage with the unclean. Jesus was willing to bear loving kindness upon the ones whom society had cast aside. Jesus was willing and ready to connect, to interact, and to bring relationship to those whose entire existence was one of isolation. Jesus was willing to emotionally, personally, and in some cases even literally, touch the untouchable – one lonely person at a time.

The 21st century face of this dynamic is most certainly different, but I do find myself wondering if we have lost sight of the power of that relational touch. We are an ever-increasingly isolated society. From automation to computerization we live every day more and more separated from one another. We walk up to machines instead of tellers at banks. We shop on computers instead of going to stores. We sit across from one another at restaurants with our faces buried in our smartphones or, more and more now, sit at home with our faces buried in our smartphones while our phones send someone to the restaurant to pick up our food for us.

I don't have to go through the litany of ways in which we are increasingly isolating ourselves as a society, but what I was drawn to in this story was the manner in which we are built for relationship and increasingly forget the importance of it. While perhaps not in lepers and women suffering from hemorrhaging, we are surrounded by those desperately longing for that relationship, and I really think we overlook it more and more every day.

In our devotional for our staff meeting this past Tuesday, the author shared a story of being out of work in ministry and finding himself driving a cab. Reluctant and more than a bit annoyed with his circumstance, thinking this new job was beneath him, he drove one person to the next until he picked up a woman at the hospital. It turns out she was a woman who had nearly died due to an overdose on methamphetamines, and she had just been released from the hospital. In the cab, she began speaking with him in very deep and meaningful ways and, as he dropped her off, she thanked him for the difference his listening and care had made in that moment her life. He could have let his frustration rule the day. He could have allowed his sense of superiority and being 'too good' for the job to impede this opportunity, but in that moment he met a woman who needed relationship – he met that woman whose outstretched arm was clamoring for a touch of Jesus' cloak – and in responding, he showed her the love of God.

The person on the street, the elderly widow next door, the teenager suffering a parental divorce, the list goes on and on and on. It may be different origins, but our world is filled with those

enduring that same sense of isolation that we see in the hemorrhaging woman of our story – and they too are clamoring for just a touch of the love Jesus in their lives. We can be those so busy, distracted, or otherwise engaged that we push them aside for the sake of what we are convinced is more important, or we can take the time to connect, to relate, to touch their lives with the love of God. Somewhere around you, right now, there is someone clamoring from the desperation of feeling alone – all they want is that touch. Whether or not they find it – that's up to you!