

Christ Church, Valdosta, Georgia
Epiphany 5, February 7, 2021
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One of the things that I miss the most in my ministry in regard to the pandemic of 2020 and 2021 is that we can no longer enjoy the divine grace of touch. Let's think about all that has been denied us for so long now. We no longer feel the consecrated host placed in our hands. We no longer touch our lips to a beautiful common cup (I really miss the chalice at the Altar). We do not shake hands with a potential new member or a close friend anymore. We can't get right up in someone's face and tell them how wonderful they are. We don't hug, kiss, or grab a shoulder during the exchange of peace. This coming Ash Wednesday, having the ashes scratched across our foreheads will be observed in different ways. Coming together in worship is now measured by the distance that is necessary between us rather than how many a given sanctuary can comfortably seat. We can't sing out our souls, no matter how good or how awful we sing. Or when we do sing, it is in carefully controlled limits with either a face mask or a shield or both. There is so much about church, about our common lives together as church, that are now so different. And check this one out: when we are able to be in church for "controlled/safe" worship, when we leave our seats at the end of a service, our presence there is then wiped away with a disinfectant. So much has suffered by not being able to reach out and touch or be touched by someone. Do you agree?

Now let's be fair and honest, here. When we could touch one another in ways not possible now, unfortunately, there was indeed something also called *bad* touch. To paint an example: I have two cavalier spaniels, one is a Blenheim and the other a Tricolor. Dogs, as you know, are built, usually with four legs. They don't come equipped with arms for personal protection so they just stand there. Or sit there. Or lay there. All they want is to be loved. My Tricolor has lived with me since her birth so she has known only good touch. Being a dog for her means there is no stranger and that everyone was created to give her attention, love, treats, and snuggles. My Blenheim, on the other hand, was a rescue puppy. She came to my household after being mistreated by a first parent. To this day, she is people shy and skittish and suspects most people, especially tall men who reach down to her, as if they are reaching out (in her mind), to hit her. She still pulls back and hides even after 12 years. It's never good to hit another. There is such a thing as bad touch.

But with that in the rearview mirror, let's now concentrate on GOOD touch. One of my all-time favorite songs has a lot to do with the divine aspects of touch. It is that fabulous song by Roberta Flack called *The First Time ever I Saw Your Face*. If you can, go and listen to it on YouTube today for a blast from the past. It simply puts forward the idea of the beauty and the magnificence and the joy of touch. With her soulful and strong voice, Roberta sings about the ways touch changes a person's life for all eternity. With touch, the sun, the moon, and the stars are the gifts of life that reveal God's glory.

Our liturgies and our sacraments involve the holiness of good touch. During healing services, foreheads are anointed, hands are placed on heads ... and there is that intimate encounter with healing. Touch sustains and upholds God's power to intervene. The sacraments of confirmation and ordination involve the laying on of hands by the bishop. With touch, there is a transfer of energy, power, relationship; there is the comforting weight of the Holy Spirit that is felt. The very idea of the incarnation implies that God touched and was touched by flesh.

There is scientific evidence that touch transfers positive energy that heals. Take massage therapy for example. A 60-90-minute session is an encounter with heaven: it enlivens the body, releases stress and strain, and allows a more complete range of mobility. Research in Nursing Science in neonatal ICUs where doses of touch administered by nurses to tiny, little itty-bitty pre-terms in incubators has shown that those babies who are touched more frequently at regular intervals have much better prognoses and clinical outcomes than those who are not.

And so. Let's bring all of this to the Gospel for today. There is something that occurs in Mark that is *very simple* and yet beautifully descriptive. It is a small incident in Jesus' ministry where Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law of a fever. Note that there is no indication that that fever had life-threatening proportions. It was a common, ordinary fever. As for the drama that would raise the hair on the back of your neck, this healing is no comparison to Lazarus' coming out of the tomb following his death four days previously, or the casting out of a nest of evil spirits from a demoniac and sending them into a herd of swine that suicidally rushes off a cliff and into the sea. It pales in regard to the healing of leprosy, congenital blindness, the healing of the paralytic, or the regeneration of a withered limb. These miraculous healings are mountain moving which awesomely proclaim Jesus' authority over disease and death. Yet Mark, for good reason, includes this little healing in his Gospel. It involves all the beauty, grace, and meaning of touch. And we should be grateful for this and heed it, especially during this pandemic. I quote: ***“Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. And the fever left her. And she began to serve them.”*** It is incredible, that one little sentence.

Even a little fever, which may have resolved itself on its own in a day or in an hour, with or without Tylenol, is of concern to Jesus. No one should suffer one minute longer that he or she has to with Jesus. And in whatever way that we suffer that is of concern to us, is also a concern of our Lord. ***Jesus reached out and touched her.***

This particular healing was not only for her own benefit, it was for the upbuilding of the community of faith. Jesus, Andrew, Simon, James and John were then able to benefit *by her touch* which nourished and strengthened them. No healing is too small or too large for God; healing and wholeness are inseparable aspects of Jesus' mission. God's touch sustains us always.

I'm almost done, just another short paragraph. Today's Gospel's reference to a fever made me think of one of my favorite prayers in our Prayer Book titled *In the Evening*. It is a prayer that first greets the arrival of the evening shadows at the close of any given day in our lives; it is also a prayer that metaphorically paints the tapestry of our lives from start to finish. We are born into a life of service, we engage in the hustle bustle of everyday life and living, and before we know it, life winds down, its fever cools, and then there is peace at the last. I quote the prayer:

O Lord, support us all the day long until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last.

Support us, merciful Lord Christ, while we engage in the glorious fever of life ... Simon's mother-in-law experienced grace and power in the fever of life. And so do we in the plenteous healing and grace in the touch of Christ. I pray that we may once again, very soon, Lord God, be privileged to know your touch in all of its many divine and wondrous ways.