

Mark 5:21-43 “Hands-On Ministry”

It's a wonder that anyone came near him, let alone a "great crowd". You couldn't have blamed people if they had stayed away in droves, or at the very least if they had kept their distance, a safe distance, from Jesus. The stories of his recent adventures on the other side of the Sea of Galilee were by now known far and wide, especially that fantastic incident over on the shore where the Gentile pig farmers lived. Some even claimed that's why they had come, to see and hear this strange man who had driven out demons there and destroyed a whole herd of pigs in the process!. But surely they knew how ritually unclean that made him, and how if they came near him or had anything to do with him they too would be unclean by association. Oh of course there were the purification rites, but those cost time, money, and effort. Anyone could have understood if they had stayed well clear of this strange Jesus of Nazareth, the one they said not only cast out demons, but healed people as well.

But they didn't stay away. They came in droves to see him. They gathered around him on the seashore in noisy, pushy, shoving, chaotic crowds. Everyone was trying to get closer, to hear, to see this man of god, but none had the courage to touch him – at least not intentionally. It's likely that at least some of them got shoved into him; how could they help it as people further back in the pack tried to get closer, but few dared actually reach out to touch him, possibly in respect but more likely in fear. Fear both of his unclean / untouchable status and perhaps more so of the obvious power in him.

I'm not sure how to help you understand the impact of that word, 'unclean'. We tend to say it as though we're describing the sidewalk outside or like a messy house, when the meaning in Jesus' day was infinitely greater, for in religious terms any contact with someone who was unclean meant the loss of one's ability to communicate with God, even to lose one's hope of salvation. The faith in which Jesus was raised and preached believed with all its heart that one who had violated the rules, who had stepped outside of the boundaries of righteousness, would offend God so intensely that God would somehow put his fingers in his ears and not even listen.

And it was no secret that Jesus was 'unclean'. He'd just returned from the Gentile shore, where he'd been in contact with a group of pig farmers who were upset about the loss of their livestock in the process of healing the demoniac of Gerasene. Jesus had been in contact not just with Gentiles, but with pig farmers, and thus could not even enter the synagogue to worship.

That's why Jairus' approach to Jesus was all the more astounding. As a leader in the synagogue, Jairus knew all too clearly the consequences for him of even talking to this man. The rules were clear, the lines that could not be crossed were drawn boldly by the laws of Moses, and he knew the penalties by heart.

The same was true for the woman with the hemorrhaging problem. For her the risks seemed in some ways less, because she was already banned from worship, and had been for twelve years. But on the other hand, her status had dropped about as far as it could go, and she knew the crowd wouldn't hesitate to condemn and even kill her with impunity if they discovered her in their midst. With the mood of the crowd being so favourable toward this Jesus they would kill her for sure if they caught her doing what she so desperately wanted to do – touch even the hem of his cloak that she might be healed. Nothing else had worked: all of the medical experts she had seen, all of the mainline and alternative routes she had tried, and now she was destitute, broken and still not healed. He was her last hope. He needn't even know that she had crossed the uncrossable line if she could only sneak up from behind.

But he did know, and sensed what had happened, that even though according to all the religious rules God could not have possibly empowered the unclean Jesus, the woman was

healed merely by touching the hem of his garment. Clearly, although confusingly to the crowd, the power of God was at work in him, and he added his blessing to her healing, sending her off with an affirmation that her faith had made her well.

Recall that this healing – the woman who touched Jesus' cloak – occurred as Jesus and the crowd followed Jairus to his house to heal the daughter. We see an escalation in the unclean status of Jesus: not only was he unclean because of the incident with the pigs, now he had been touched by a woman with bleeding issues. And then Jesus commits the ultimate violation of the religious purity laws by touching a corpse – the body of Jairus' daughter who has died while the crowd was en route to the house. Clearly, undeniably, there was no possible way that Jesus in this ultimate unclean state could draw upon the power of God – and yet, taking her by the hand and commanding her to get up, he also clearly demonstrated the power of God at work in him as she rose and began to walk about. To confirm that she was neither a ghost nor a zombie Jesus instructed those who watched this happen to give the girl something to eat. Who could deny that his power to heal her was from God? Nobody!

Jesus had undeniably crossed legal and religious lines simply by being in Gentile territory among pig farmers, yet his power to heal the man possessed by demons was undiminished. Jairus crossed the same line by approaching Jesus to heal his daughter, and instead of being shunned by Jesus, Jesus turned and reached out to heal the daughter.

And what about the woman who touched the hem of his cloak? Instead of simply writing her contact off as one more shove, push or jostle in the crowd, Jesus recognized what had happened, and sought the woman out, not to condemn her, not to incite the crowd to drive her back into lonely, sick isolation, but to comfort her. Even though she had by all legal accounting violated him through touching his clothing, even though she had crossed just about every religious line drawn, Jesus softly called her to him, affirmed her faith, confirmed her healing, and sent her on her way with his blessing of peace. It was clear that Gentiles, foreigners, women, children, tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners, lepers, the unclean, yes and even the righteous could now be touched by the loving power of God.

Thank God that much of the church today hears the message of grace in Jesus' reaching out in love, and hears the call that as the body of Christ the church is still called to reach out in love. Reach out to help those who need the help most, in healing, in food, in dignity. In the past year over three thousand meals have been served at our Community Breakfasts. During the same period over six thousand people have received nutrition from the Food Bank. While we don't keep count, I would estimate that during the same year some three thousand loaves of bread have gone to grateful people. These are all examples of "hands-on" ministries here at Central, but it doesn't stop there. Last year people within The Presbyterian Church in Canada to reach out in love with almost four million dollars in donations to Presbyterian World Service and Development, and we at Central contributed in that reaching out. But there's more. Through millions in donations to Presbyterians Sharing, Presbyterians have reached out in love to First Nations to help with healing and reconciliation; have reached out in love to struggling rural and remote congregations; have reached out in love to help enthusiastic new congregations get started; and have reached out in love providing missionary workers continue to demonstrate the grace of God in Christ.

But there's still more. Through contributions in Presbytery dues local Presbyterians have reached out in love to help children encounter Christ's love in a camp setting at Camp Douglas; have reached out in love to Hummingbird Circles; and have helped congregations to thrive, proclaiming God's redeeming love in Christ.

From our gospel story we see the abundant power of God in Christ as he reached out to touch and to heal, in a ministry that was neither aloof nor remote but very “hands on.” His ministry was not some abstract theology, but a ministry that touched people where they hurt and where they needed help and support. The church as the body of Christ is still called to reach out in that same love, by the grace of God, to offer healing and hope to all who will accept, and we are blessed to be part of the response to that call. May God continue to sustain us in our efforts.