

In touch (Mark 5.21-43)

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In Greek mythology, *Antaeus*, son of *Gaia* (earth) and *Poseidon* (sea), was a Libyan giant whose strength appeared invincible. He challenged all passers-by to a wrestling match, and invariably won. That is until he met Hercules. Hercules had gone to the garden of the Hesperides for an apple, and on the way back, Antaeus challenged him to a contest. Hercules was doing well, but somehow whenever he threw the giant down, Antaeus bounced back strongly. Hercules eventually realized that *Gaia*, Earth, was restoring the giant's strength, and that to prevail he must cut him off from his rejuvenating source. He eventually did this by holding Antaeus aloft in a bear hug until all his power was sapped.

Now, there's a deep wisdom being conveyed in this story, and it's there in the gospel reading as well. A reminder that to prevail in the midst of life's troubles we need to connect with the source that truly sustains. *'If I but touch his clothes, I'll be made well'*, the haemorrhaging woman says to herself. She did, and she was – after 12 years of suffering. Jairus' 12-year-old daughter is sick to the point of death *'Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live'*, Jairus pleads. He did and she was. Both women are suffering, losing ground – their life draining away. The touch of Jesus is profoundly restorative. His rootedness in the living God puts those who touch him into contact with the regenerative Source of all life.

It's an encouraging story, an inviting story, and the more I read it, the more there is to appreciate.

I'm struck by the fact, for example, that both people restored here are women – women on the outer. In the kingdom of God, women matter, all women. In the world, mostly, men dominate. In the vision of God, this

imbalance and injustice is redressed. In the gospels, Jesus' ministry is sustained and honoured by the faithful support and quiet, courageous witness of women. And, in the ministry of Jesus, women themselves, women from all backgrounds and all situations, are seen, heard, respected and restored.

The older woman in this story was a wretched outcast (like the demoniac in last week's reading). Her condition, constant bleeding, meant permanent ritual uncleanness, and that meant separation, loneliness, poverty and shame. All that, along with unremitting physical discomfort, weakness and weariness. It's no wonder she went undercover in that crowd, she wasn't supposed to be there! It was a huge risk; born of desperation, and deep intuition: *'If I but touch his clothes, I'll be made well'*. She risks all to make this connection, and the effect is decisive, as when Antaeus is thrown to the ground. *'Immediately'*, it says, *'the bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was healed'*. Simultaneously, Jesus senses 'power' surging forth. He stops to inquire, much to the disciple's chagrin. But the woman, 'knowing what'd happened', comes forward, falls trembling before him, and tells 'the whole truth'.

It's a tense moment in the drama. She's broken both social and religious taboos. Will she be rebuked; condemned? Will the crowd turn on her? I imagine it to be a very pregnant pause... And then, Jesus speaks... *'Daughter, your faith has made you well'*. 'Daughter', he calls her, opening the way back to a life, long off limits – to family, friendship, intimacy, community. *'Daughter, your faith has made you well'*. According to the Law, her uncleanness should have made him unclean but in fact the 'contagion' goes the other way – his wholeness makes her whole, his connection restores her to belonging and life.

And, it's the same with the young girl. Like the woman with the flow of blood, she too is sick, struggling, losing ground. In fact, as he speaks a word of life to the first woman, she dies. His delay seems to have cost her dearly. Mourners appear bearing the sad news, and advising Jairus: *'Why trouble the teacher any further?'* In other words, it's too late, it's over, give it away – she's dead. And besides, as a corpse, she too has become unclean, touching her would (again!) risk defilement. Jesus overhears and proffers different counsel: Don't give in to fear, Jairus, trust me... They continue, and, well, you know what happens. He enters the room with her parents, and three disciples, goes to her bedside, takes her hand, and says, *'Tal'i.tha cūm'* (little girl get up). And *'immediately'*, she rises and begins to walk around. She was 12 years old, on the verge of womanhood, and in the moment of connection with Jesus, her life, and her potential to create (to share) life, is restored.

So, there's a word here about the place and dignity of women. And, also something about the place and power of faith. In these two encounters, Jesus affirms the connection between faith and wellbeing/salvation. Now, this has led to some very troublesome claims over the years. I've heard stories of people being told that the reason they're not physically healed by God is because they don't have enough faith. As if it all depends upon them, and that God is sitting there officiously weighing up the depth or quality of their confidence, trust and devotion. This has been devastating for people already suffering, making them feel judged, condemned and defeated. How different to what we see here – where Jesus is compassionate, patient and willing.

Which raises the question of what it actually means to exercise faith? Is it teeth gritted conviction, unwavering demand, the absence of all doubt? I don't think so. In these stories, faith seems to have more to do with a willingness to approach Jesus, to risk 'touching' and being touched by him –

daring to entrust ourselves and those we love to God; undefendedly, exposing our need, believing that God wills our good. Exactly how this manifests at particular times isn't something whose form we're guaranteed. 'Healing' isn't necessarily the same as 'cure'. Faith is exercised, then, in doing what we can to remain open and connect (or, as with Jairus) support another to connect with God's life and love. And that connection, these encounters suggest, always makes a difference.

There's one other aspect of this story to highlight this morning, and that's the perspective it offers on the notion of interruption. We spend a lot of life being interrupted. Or that's how it can seem. We have a goal, a course set, and circumstances intervene – Covid 19, the onset of sickness, an accident, the hospitalisation or death of a loved one, these things and a thousand others, large and small, interrupt our best laid plans. So, here's a question; when is an interruption *not* an interruption? If I was to draw an answer from this passage, I'd say it's when we accept it as part of the whole. What do I mean?

This passage begins with Jesus responding to a request to visit a very sick girl. The situation is urgent, she's dying. It's imperative, one thinks, that Jesus get there soon. But along the way, a woman with her own need (and hope) wades into the crowd and touches him. Jesus really doesn't have time to stop (and maybe he didn't need to), but he does, responding fully. As it is written, he treats it as integral to his work. He remains present and responsive. He could've treated it as an irritation. Could've ignored the feeling, or brushed her aside. Could've rebuked her – 'Don't you know how busy I am?' Could've complained: 'I don't need this!!' But he didn't resist. He discerned it was important, and responded with grace.

Of course, some things *are* distracting, and need to be treated as such. Jesus didn't just respond willy-nilly to every request (e.g., Mark 1.38) – wasn't run by others' agendas. He was always discerning, and when he discerned something to be significant, as in this story, he accepted, and attended fully.

So, a story about the importance of connecting in with the source that sustains us, and of exercising faith in the seeking of this connection. A story about God's love and care for each and every person and their circumstances – a worried father, a shunned woman, a dying child. And a story about an interruption as an occasion for grace. Jesus is central to all that unfolds in this story. It's through his radical human presence and being earthed in God that reconnection, hope and healing are communicated to those who touch in with him; are touched by him. And let's remember, folks, we are the *body* of Christ. The more we, like Jesus, are present to God, grounded in the life of God, the more we become capable of communicating what he does – recognition, care, belonging, healing. We become, as Teresa of Avila said, God's hands and feet in the world, available as Jesus was to visit the sick, call the lonely, bear patiently with interruption, be present as best we can. God's divine life flows in and through Jesus, and as his body here and now, let it flow in and through us. **Amen**