

Touching Miracles
Lamentations 3:22-33
Mark 5:21-43
July 1, 2018
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
Clemson, SC

Prayer for Illumination

God of abundant life, your grace is our daily bread.
Nourish us by your Word and
fill us with your Spirit so that we may grow in faith and love;
through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Introduction to the text—Lamentations 3:22-33

A Greek version of Lamentations contains a sentence not present in the older Hebrew text: “These are the words of the prophet Jeremiah as he sat upon a hill weeping over Jerusalem.” While scholars doubt that Jeremiah is the author, the sentiment expressed in this book from a survivor of the nation’s destruction pours out sorrow, anger and dismay after Jerusalem’s traumatic defeat and occupation by the Babylonians. The most hopeful words in the whole book begin our passage today, holding forth one of the faithful’s deepest beliefs about YHWH.

Introduction to the text—Mark 5:21-43

Last week we heard of Jesus’ miracle of calming the storm with the disciples on the Sea of Galilee. Between that story and today’s passage Jesus and his disciples crossed over to the country of the Gerasenes—the realm of the dead, where a demon-possessed man begged to be healed and then begged to go with Jesus. The people of that country on the other hand begged Jesus to leave them. He did and we pick up the story now where begging continues. Our passage today is an intercalation or inclusio, two stories with one inserted in the middle and they are to aid in interpreting one another more fully together.

Fourteen weeks ago our niece Evelyn was born. Her due date was Father's Day. At birth she weighed 1 pound and 10 ounces. Today she weighs 6 pounds 10 ounces and she is nothing short of one of God's miracles. One of the main activities in Evelyn's fragile life so far is what's called "Kangaroo Time"—that's the time each day when her mother and father come to the hospital to hold Evelyn and have skin to skin contact. Human touch is vital to the healthy development of children, especially to preemies like Evelyn. Her parents would do anything for her, to help her live and grow. Love does that. Love shows up day after day, making the human connection through touch that is life-giving.

Each morning the extended family receive an email with pictures, updates, and an occasional video of Evelyn's progress. In a way seeing that good news is like "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. Thy mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning" and so are Evelyn's updates. Good news is always needed in our world especially when it is about children.

Perhaps you saw the viral video recently about 64 year-old Tim Cook, who is blind and deaf and was traveling by plane from Boston to Los Angeles. After about an hour into the five-hour flight he wanted a cup of water and some other things, but did not have a way to communicate with the flight attendant. So the attendant asked if anyone knew sign language. That's when 15 year-old Clara Daly immediately reached up and pushed the call light. A year earlier she had learned to sign to help with her dyslexia. Now Clara was kneeling next to Cook's seat at the front of the plane and signed into his hand. "How are you? Are you okay?" Over the next several hours Clara and Tim shared hand in hand about their lives. Afterward Cook said that "Clara made him happy and it was the best trip he had ever had."ⁱ

Evelyn and her parents, Tim and Clara, and all of us need to touch and to be touched. At birth oxytocin is released, known as the love hormone, it helps us build trust and bonding. When we touch one another with compassion as Evelyn and her parents do and as Tim and Clara did, a kinder, safer world is the result. Since World War II scientists have been studying "skin hunger" and its two most hungry populations are prisoners and the elderly, both often isolated and lonely.ⁱⁱ

Without touch one can experience profound emotional and even physical consequences. Humans need touch almost as much as we need food and water. Touching one another also keeps the peace, reduces stress, and the stress hormone cortisol. Cultures, like the French, that are armed with touch are less likely to experience aggression.ⁱⁱⁱ I am sure that the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years would have been starving for meaningful physical contact with another person—she was skin hungry.

Imagine being in a large crowd and seeking to touch Jesus' cloak in order to be healed. The large crowd around Jesus ignored her, but imagine what they would have thought after learning of her healing? "Did she touch me when she was still unclean?" "How long has she been standing next to me?" "She broke the rules of unclean people by being so close to me! Who does she think she is?"

She is the unnamed woman, who was banned from society, whose only hope remaining was Jesus. She had tried doctors and cures to no success, so what did she have to lose since she had already lost everything, including her dignity? Just a touch is what she thought, what she believed. That is how powerful she understood this Jesus to be. Jesus was on his way to

the synagogue leader's home to help his daughter. Surely Jesus would not stop to help this woman on his determined way. So the woman reached out and touched his robe, believing that was enough. And it was. She could feel the healing happening when Jesus asked, "Who touched me?"

The last thing she wanted was to stop the procession and be found out that she was ritually impure because of her hemorrhaging. As power had flowed out of Jesus, it stopped the flow of her bleeding that had lasted 12 years. Then the crowd opened up as she fell before Jesus and confessed to him. Jesus recognized her and did not condemn her as tradition of that day would have required. Jesus saw new life in her and called her "Daughter"—giving her a name, this woman with no name was now related to Jesus and he recognized her faith as that which made her well. Perhaps her dis-ease was also being cast out and off by society. Still, Jesus blessed her with shalom/peace and the promise of continued healing.

This daughter's story was sandwiched by the story of Jairus and his daughter who had come to Jesus first and was now last, even too late as his people came to inform him of the little girl's death. Jairus had begged more than once for Jesus to come and lay hands on her. But Jesus had stopped for this woman and now it was too late for Jairus' daughter.

The religious leader who was used to others begging favors of him was now so desperate that he lost all hope, but Jesus said, "Do not fear, only believe." Jesus pressed on, thinned the crowd and invited Peter, James, and John to go with him. (These same four are with Jesus at the transfiguration.) Jesus casts out those preparing for the funeral and took his friends and the girl's parents in where she was. Jesus touched her, told her to get up and she did. The 12 year-old who had no life in her was now filled with life, and was of the age to bear life. Those with Jesus were amazed. Even though Jesus tells them not to tell anyone, they do. Otherwise we would not know. He also tells them to feed her for that is what his disciples are to do for his sheep.

Some of us will want to focus on the amazing miracles that happened in these stories and we will wonder, "Do I have enough faith to believe that Jesus will heal my loved one or even me?" The woman had faith in Jesus and he healed her, but Jesus resurrected the little girl. (This is the same verb used about Jesus.) Jesus loved the little girl regardless of whether she got up to live again on earth or in heaven with the almighty God. In situations where persons die of illness and disease, faith and healing come later. They come from remembering and gratitude to God for the life of that loved one, who is no less loved by Jesus than that little girl.

The amazing miracles are only one way of seeing these stories yet as Christians we do not base our faith in Christ on miracles. Rather our faith in Christ is based on recognizing that the One who was crucified, died, buried, and resurrected is the Son of God. That reality is the basis for faith in Christ, not that Christ does miracles.

The backside of these stories casts more light on Jesus whose power to heal is far greater than we can imagine and leads us to ask, "Do all persons have access to Jesus and the wholeness he offers?" Yes! Jesus does not reserve healing for only the wealthy and powerful, but also for the least.

- This story of Jesus is for the powerful and influential insiders like Jairus who was the synagogue leader, known in the community, a privileged male, one who in desperation took a risk to fall down and beg repeatedly to this possible Messiah.
- This story of Jesus is for the least, the outsiders like the unnamed woman who was unclean in the community, not really a part of the community at all, but also was desperate and risked touching Jesus' clothes to see if what she had heard and believed about Jesus was really true.
- This story of Jesus is for us, who are Jesus' church today who have found nothing and no one in our fragmented world can bring about healing / shalom other than Jesus Christ, and so we come to the Lord's table to be fed as living witnesses that Jesus is here for all persons.
- This story of Jesus is for us to tell to persons beyond these doors who are desperate and asleep like the little girl and perhaps have heard about this Jesus and his church and wondered if what they heard is true—that all are welcomed here and “even if I have no faith, I will be touched by others with compassion and fed the Good News.”

This story of Jesus is true. Will it be for the church as well?

To the God of all grace,
 who calls you to share God's eternal glory
 in union with Christ,
 be the power forever! Amen.

ⁱ “Teen Uses Sign Language to Help Deaf & Blind Man on Flight: The ‘Best Trip I’ve Ever Had,’ He Says” by Cathy Free for *People* online Human Interest story on June 27, 2018 at 11:52 AM. Accessed on June 29, 2018 at <https://people.com/human-interest/clara-daly-blind-deaf-man-plane-viral-tim-cook/>.

ⁱⁱ The Life of the Skin-Hungry: Can You Go Crazy from a Lack of Touch? By Sirin Kale for *Broadly* on November 8, 2016 at 9:00 AM. Accessed on June 29, 2018 at https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/d3gzba/the-life-of-the-skin-hungry-can-you-go-crazy-from-a-lack-of-touch.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*