

In Touch With Jesus

Mark 5:21-43

July 1, 2012

I.

We mark two occasions today. For Susan and me this is our sixth anniversary at St. Thomas. I preached my first sermon right here six years ago today. I'm sure you still remember it word for word. And we both continue to be thankful for the opportunity to serve you and our Lord.

We also recognize the Fourth of July a little in advance. On Wednesday we celebrate our heritage of independence and freedom. Flags wave, bands play, and we gather with picnics, fireworks, and fellowship. It's a day to remember the men and women who have served since that day in 1776 up to the present time to proclaim and preserve our freedoms.

And later this morning we will hear a medley of patriotic music. The choir will combine several tunes into one presentation. And doesn't that also describe our rather long Gospel reading today?

It was a biblical medley that combined two different stories. And the story about the bleeding woman seemed to come out of nowhere to interrupt the story of the dying daughter. We might wonder why the reading was organized in this way with one event sandwiched between the beginning and end of another supposedly unrelated event.

But there is a connection between them. Jesus' touch restored the little girl to life, and the woman who touched him was healed from her bleeding. In both cases faith was the decisive element. In both cases faith meant being in touch with Jesus.

And these two stories had happy endings, didn't they? There are no hard words to explain. No one sinned or had to be forgiven. Everybody was healed and got well. The power of faith is evident, and the outcomes can make us feel good. We might think, "That's the way things are supposed to be. If we have faith all will be well." Period. End of story. Right?

II.

There is more to it. Let's go back and quickly review what happened. Some important pieces are not as obvious as others. Jesus and the disciples had returned from a journey beyond the Sea of Galilee, and immediately encountered a large crowd. And one of the local religious leaders named Jairus came to Jesus and asked him to heal his daughter who was dying.

Jesus agreed, and they all left for Jairus' house surrounded by the crowd that pressed closely in upon Jesus. We soon will see that two important lessons about faith can be drawn from the actions and role of this crowd in the reading.

We start with a woman in the crowd, who had been bleeding for twelve years with no cure, who reached out as they were walking and touched Jesus believing she would be healed. And she was healed on the spot.

But, here's the unusual part. Jesus didn't intend in advance to heal her. He didn't even know she was there. It just happened; the only such example in the Bible. We might note that many other people were crowding him and touching him, and they were not affected at all. But faith made this one particular woman special.

And Jesus knew something was different because he felt power go out from him, and he asked who touched him. He still didn't know who it was, and possibly had not yet realized that anyone had been healed. But out of fear the woman told what she had done, and Jesus explained that her faith had made her well.

And as they were standing there the story immediately shifted back to Jairus' daughter. A messenger arrived with news that the little girl had died. Jesus, however, said to her father, "Do not fear, only believe." "Only believe."

And so they continued on, but with one important change. Jesus no longer allowed the crowd to follow. Only Jairus and three disciples went with him. And the rest is history. Jesus came to Jairus' home, took the girl's hand in his, and restored her to life.

III.

We can draw some parallels between this story and our lives, can't we? Just as Jesus told Jairus to have faith his daughter would be healed, and just as he told the bleeding woman her faith had healed her, so also we are called to faith. This would be a typical sermon about this reading.

But there is another aspect of both stories that draws upon the description of the crowd to illustrate the realities of meaningful faith.

First, the reading says that many people were bumping up against Jesus on that road, but nothing happened to them. They were not reaching out to Jesus in faith. They were just there in the crowd. Only the woman who reached out in faith experienced the grace of healing.

The same is true today. Many people would say they are believers because they are in the crowd around Jesus. They might be there out of habit or tradition or routine. They might be in attendance, but not truly present, and do not experience our Lord's power.

But that's not necessarily all bad. Being in the crowd is better than not being there. It's a way to start, but it's not enough in the end. One way or another we must move from the crowd to a personal relationship with Jesus and be in touch with him so he can touch our hearts.

That truth leads to the second point, which arose after news that Jairus' daughter died. Jesus had told Jairus to "only believe." There no longer was a place on the journey for those who were merely curious or going along for the ride.

And so the crowd did not continue on with Jesus. He went only with three disciples, and Jairus. Being part of the crowd got people part of the way. But faith was required for the rest of the trip.

That also is true today. We don't want to get left behind either. We have started out with Jesus, but we also want to end up with him. And sincere faith is the ticket for that journey.

IV.

And at this point we should examine what Jesus meant by "faith." Today, faith usually is described in the context of salvation and eternal life. We believe Jesus died for our sins (Rom. 1:6, Eph. 2:8), and through his resurrection we will live with God forever (Rom. 6:5).

But in the stories we heard today faith had another aspect. Jesus was still alive, and was in the early part of his ministry. His death and its meaning for us was a revelation for the future. He had not yet talked about salvation as St. Paul later proclaimed it, and as we now believe it.

Instead, when Jesus spoke of faith and belief in today's reading, he wanted people to know that God was acting through him to foreshadow the coming of God's kingdom. He wanted us to love one another in preparation for that glorious time when God's will in heaven also is done on earth.

And Jesus did not make the lame walk, cast out demons, and bring Jairus' daughter back to life just to be a wonder worker. He did those things to help people understand God's plans for

humanity, and that through him those plans would be fulfilled. His miracles briefly opened windows to the glory of the kingdom, and gave us previews of what yet is to come on earth.

So, while the Bible certainly proclaims faith in the context of the next world, today's reading also applied it in the context of this world. Faith always is part of the hereafter, but today Jesus told us it also is part of the here and now.

And on this Independence Day weekend, I am optimistic about the here and now. God's kingdom is on the way. The world is getting better even though the media might suggest otherwise.

Consider the progress humanity has made during the centuries since Jesus proclaimed God's teachings to a godless and oppressive Roman empire. It often has been two steps forward, and one step back, but it has been progress. And the church has played an important part.

And certainly we still see injustice. Disease and hunger exist, but not to the extent as in earlier times when it pervaded most of society except for the privileged. And evil and wickedness remain with us, but are being tempered by godly precepts that Jesus taught, even if some people apply them in the context of secular ethics and morality.

The bottom line it that the kingdom is coming closer. Development of a more orderly society, and discoveries in science, medicine, and other disciplines that enrich our lives and give us comfort, are parts of God's plans. God was, and remains, involved in all of human progress, and his work is not yet complete.

In the meantime we will encounter difficulties. Things will not always seem fair. Jesus asks us, as he did in today's Gospel, to believe and to have faith that in him we will find grace, hope, and peace, And he will enable us to rejoice in good times and be encouraged in bad.

V.

Later in the service, during communion, we will sing one of my favorite hymns. The title is "It is well with my soul," and I'm sure most of you will recognize it. The words were written in 1873 by a prominent Chicago businessman and lawyer named Horatio G. Spafford. And it tells a story of faith growing from two disasters in Spafford's life

The first was the Chicago fire of 1871, which almost ruined him financially. He had invested heavily in real estate that was destroyed and not adequately insured.

Then he, his wife, and four daughters planned to go to England to support a revival organized by the famous evangelist Dwight Moody, who later founded the Bible Institute of the same name.

But a business matter detained Spafford, and he sent his wife and children ahead by ship. And while crossing the Atlantic, all four of his daughters tragically died in a collision with another ship. Spafford's wife survived and sent him the now famous telegram, "Saved alone. What do I do?"

A grieving Spafford left for England to join his wife, and during the voyage the captain told him that his own ship was passing near the spot where his daughters lost their lives. Spafford sat down and wrote the words to this hymn. It is well with my soul. He later told of his belief that the Holy Spirit inspired them. Remember those words during communion. It is well with my soul.

These words speak to the eternal hope that all believers have, no matter what might befall us. And they also speak to the faith that sustains us now through joys and sorrows, good times and bad. Finally, they call us to know that we are God's children, we belong to Jesus' flock, and we can take comfort in knowing he cares for and sustains all who, in faith, call upon his name. *Amen.*