

*Touching God*

Luke 8:40-56

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“I could imagine a life without sight, sound, smell, or taste, but it seemed impossible to strip out my sense of touch. While seeing is believing, to touch feels like an encounter with the final reality,” Gretchen Rubin writes in her book, *Life in Five Senses*.<sup>1</sup>

I wonder if you can imagine life without touch—years without feeling another person’s arms wrapped around your sides and embracing your back in a healing hug; days without the sensation of the coziest blanket encasing your body like a mummy on a cold winter’s night; trips to the grocery store without being able to press your thumb into an avocado to see if it is ready to be transformed into guacamole.

Can you imagine life without the sense of touch?

I have a picture hanging in my office of one of the most important times I was touched. The photo was taken on a warm, rainy night in June when a standing room only crowd gathered inside a large unairconditioned auditorium at Lake Junaluska, a Methodist mecca in the mountains of Western, North Carolina. While I cannot recall who preached that night, I can still hear the thunder that punctuated the service of ordination during which I knelt before Bishop Charlene Kammerer, bowed my head, and felt her place her hands on my head before applying a bit of pressure as she prayed, “Almighty God, pour upon Donna Mardell Claycomb the Holy Spirit for the office and work of an elder.” I cannot imagine Bishop Kammerer’s hands are any larger than the average woman’s hands, but they seemed to touch every ounce of my being that night as divine power was transferred from God, to the church, to her, and to me as I was granted the authority to preach the word of God and administer the sacraments.

When has touch transformed you?

I may never forget a moment that took place in the sanctuary nearly a decade ago when every ounce of my authority was seemingly placed aside as a former church member named Susan guided me to a chair in the front of the sanctuary while dozens of you came forward and laid hands on me at the conclusion of worship. While I regularly have the privilege of praying for you in some of life’s scariest moments, in that moment, many of you were tangibly present to me in one of my scariest moments as you placed your hands on me and asked God to work through the physician who God had called to remove invasive melanoma from my body. I left worship not knowing whether there would be clear margins or signs of cancer having spread to my lymph nodes, but I knew I had been made well—that I was whole regardless of what the pathology report might say.

When has touch healed you?

While our other senses are limited to the head, the sense of touch can be felt throughout the entire body. Our skin, weighing between eight and fifteen pounds, is not only one of our largest organs, our skin is also a testament to our remarkable design. Some of our thickest skin is on our heels, enabling us to walk barefoot without pain. Our thinnest skin is on

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<sup>1</sup> Gretchen Rubin, *Life in Five Senses* (New York: Crown, 2023), 166.

our eyelids, a creative feature that enables us to naturally wake up when light starts to peak through the corner of the bedroom curtains. Our hands are our most sensitive body part. We experiment with their power often by touching things, something a store clerk, museum guard, or parent of a young child knows well. Every part of our skin, no matter its location, holds touch receptors that collect information and send it to the brain, allowing us to feel extraordinary pleasure, perceive texture, be soothed, and avoid pain.

While tasting, smelling, hearing, and seeing might delight us, touch, more than any other sense, can heal us. “Research shows that giving and receiving physical touch has the power to heal more than a broken heart,” writes Dana Kantowitz for the University of Miami Health System before continuing to describe how “safe and consensual skin-to-skin contact supports physical, emotional, and mental health” at every age.<sup>2</sup>

“Babies who get skin-to-skin contact gain weight more quickly, sleep better, cry less, and get fewer infections...”<sup>3</sup>

Adults who are safely and consensually touched may have lower stress and blood pressure.

But we do not need another human to touch us to experience the benefit of touch. The touch of an animal can also have a healing effect with one study showing how “a ten-minute encounter with a therapy dog” helped to lower the pain of patients being treated in an emergency room.<sup>4</sup>

I suspect many of you do not need scientific data to understand or believe in the power of safe, consensual touch.

Our lives have many moments when words offer little, if any help, while touch transforms us—a reality a poor, suffering, ritually unclean woman knew to be true.

I wonder how this woman mustered the courage needed to become part of the crowd that day.

Unlike Jairus, a leader of the synagogue who would have enjoyed considerable status in the community, this bleeding woman would have been considered unclean and therefore excluded from the community.

Unlike Jairus who would have had significant resources, this woman has nothing left as she has spent all her money on unsuccessful attempts to be healed.

Unlike Jairus, who falls before Jesus and begs him to come heal his daughter, this woman comes behind Jesus and says nothing.

And unlike Jairus whose request for Jesus’ attention is delayed, this woman becomes the object of Jesus’ attention when she reaches out and touches Jesus’ garment, a touch that enables Jesus to feel power going out from him and into another person who he has not yet seen.

The one who was trying to hide now takes on the posture of Jairus and falls before Jesus, declares why she had the audacity to touch Jesus, and testifies that she has been immediately healed.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://news.umiamihealth.org/en/the-healing-power-of-human-touch/>

<sup>3</sup> Rubin, 169.

<sup>4</sup> Rubin, 172.

Jesus then offers her something even more significant than stopping her streaming blood. He affirms that the woman has been made well, a pronouncement that would have allowed the one who has been and outsider for twelve painful years to be brought back into community, before telling her to go in peace.

The Greek word translated “well” in the New Revised Standard Version can also mean “whole,” while the word “peace” can mean “a song in the body” or “quietness of heart.”

Your faith has made you whole, Jesus says.

Now go with a quietness of heart that might make you feel like your body is singing instead of suffering.

The woman would have known that touching Jesus risked making Jesus unclean. She was likely aware of how there might be people in the crowd who would recognize her and seek to send her back into isolation. And still, she allowed her faith to propel her as she showed up, pressed in, reached up, and touched the fringe of Jesus’ cloak.

Some of us may very well be longing to be healed—to hear there is no remaining sign of cancer, or that the brain activity is returning to normal, or that the diagnosis of what is causing us to feel pain, discomfort, or exhaustion is one that can be treated.

But whether we are in need of physical healing or not, I suspect all of us are longing to be seen, fully included, made whole, and given a peace that passes all understanding.

What, then, would it look like for us to press in, reach up, and touch Jesus with the audacity of this woman?

It might look like stilling ourselves for a moment to say, “It’s me, Lord. I am tired. I am weary. I am worn. But I believe you have the power to restore me, and I am placing myself in your care.”

Or to borrow the prayer taught to me by my dear pastor friend, Julie, last week, “Here I am, as I am, in the world, as it is, supported by grace, open to God’s love, present to my life in Christ,” before learning how sometimes simply sitting in God’s presence is enough to remind us that we are not alone.

Maybe it looks like our placing someone before Jesus in our prayers as Jairus did with his daughter. “God, I cannot begin to imagine what my friend is going through. But I know you do. Will you please remind them of your presence, heal them, and make them whole?”

Or if we are struggling to believe in miracles, we might simply assure someone in pain that they are seen, that they are not forgotten, that they are a powerful part of this community by showing up with a soft blanket, a card, or a meal—remembering how these touches can and do bring about healing.

Professor Kate Bowler tells the story of when now retired Bishop Will Willimon showed up to pray with her before she went into surgery aimed at curing her of her stage four colon cancer. The retired bishop who is known for being candid and clever reportedly started the prayer with, “God, you better not make a liar out of me.”

Like Bishop Willimon, I am painfully aware of how not everyone gets healed on this side of heaven.

And...I believe with every part of my being that all of us can be made whole, that God has us and will not let us go, that Jesus longs to steady our beating hearts, replacing anxiety with a song of peace, and that even though we die, yet shall we live.

I have never touched the fringe of Jesus’ garment.

But I have been touched by Jesus.

I don't know how it happened.

But he touched me and made me whole—and if I have one prayer for all of you, it is that you, too, will experience all that it means to be made whole.