

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 4, 2018  
Mark 1:29-39  
The Rev. Carenda Baker

We are “fearfully and wonderfully made”, declares Psalm 139. The little experiment of imagining what it would be like to be without one of our five senses has often been used as part of awareness and sensitivity training. Walk around blindfolded for 24 hours to get a sense of what it is like to be without sight. How quickly your sense of hearing becomes more sharply attuned, and how your fingers become more nimble and aware of the slightly nuanced changes as you reach out to feel for walls and doors, corners and sharp table edges. Imagine not being able to taste the difference between that salty soft pretzel and your favorite sour pickle, between balsamic vinaigrette dressing and the sweetness of melting chocolate. What would it be like to have never been able to hear your mother or father’s or siblings’ voices, or the beautiful strains of your favorite music? Food loses its appeal when we can’t smell it. Sauerkraut and spiced cider just are not the same if you can’t smell them as you bring them to your lips. And what would life be like without the sensation of touch – no difference between the smoothness of a baby’s skin and the roughness of sandpaper, no difference between a hot stove and a cold shower, between a tender kiss and a hearty slap on the back?

“Scientists and psychologists have conducted tests on primates, as well as on infant children, that were deprived at an early age of human touch, with the results showing devastating effects on developmental skills and sociability”. (*P.C. Ennis, Feasting on the Word*).

P.C. Ennis, theologian in residence at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, GA points out that it is worth our attending to “the number of times the Scriptures refer to touching. In today’s gospel reading, Jesus comes and takes Peter’s mother-in-law by the hand, lifts her up, and the fever leaves her. Throughout both our Hebrew and Greek Scriptures – the angel who touches the hollow of Jacob’s hip; the blind man whom Jesus “touched”; the woman with the hemorrhage for 12 years who secretly reaches out and touches the hem of Jesus’ garment, Jesus washing the disciples’ feet – there is one incident after another pointing to the power of touch. It could be said that in Scripture while touch does actually occur, touch is also a metaphor for intimacy, for presence, for relationship. Some theologians even suggest that to be “created in the image of God” means that we are created for relationship, “for it is not right that human beings should be alone” (Gen. 2:18).”

Think again about that encounter between Peter’s mother-in-law and Jesus. She is sick in bed with a fever. Jesus reaches out and touches her, takes her by the hand and raises her up. The fever leaves. And she begins to serve.

She is made well and is then able to resume her work of reaching out to touch and care for others. Her physical health is restored and her role in the community is restored. She is able to take up the disciple's role of serving.

To be touched by Jesus is to be healed. And part of that healing process is offering Jesus' touch to others. Word spread quickly about Jesus' power to heal. Folks with various maladies and diseases flocked to see him. "And the whole city was gathered around the door." Who wouldn't want to be made well? And yet Jesus was human. He had human limitations. It must have been exhausting, touching, offering healing to all those who were brought to him from sundown well into the night.

It is extremely telling and instructive what Jesus does next. After those many hours of meeting and touching people in need to make them well, after offering his gift of healing to so many, Jesus goes off by himself in the early morning, while it is still dark to pray. We don't want to believe it, but human beings do not have inexhaustible amounts of energy – physical, emotional, or spiritual - to be constantly present and caring for others. Jesus' body, heart, mind, and spirit needed restoration and renewal. He needed solitude and the quietness of prayer, of being in God's presence to experience both rest and strength to continue his work. Preaching and healing. Healing and preaching. Great healer that he was, Jesus did not stay in one place and heal everyone.

Just as his teaching, his words, were meant to be shared by his disciples, so his healing touch was meant to be passed on to others, not just kept for one's self.

I'm not sure how often we think about this – that the healing we experience is not just for our own sake. Being touched by Jesus is to be changed, and that goodness and mercy and health we receive is meant to be passed on, paid forward. As I think about our Wednesday healing Eucharist services, nearly always folks who come need healing themselves in one way or another, and usually everyone who comes asks for prayers for others whom they know need Jesus' touch, too. It is a beautiful thing, and a witness to what it means to be a disciple. To be a disciple is to pass on the good news, to bring that healing touch of Jesus out into the wider world.

None of us is completely whole. Even if we enjoy good physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health, we are touched deeply by the brokenness, sin and sickness around us. We live and breathe it, are immersed in it. We are part of systems that are not well and need healing – intergenerational family systems, social systems tainted by the touch and influence of forces that oppose God. Racism, sexism, classism. Broken ways of being human together breed more brokenness. Who of us does not need to experience Jesus' touch?

One of the many blessings of being part of the Christian community is that, while we are not perfect, we do have many opportunities to experience Jesus' healing touch and to spread that touch of healing and health – literally salvation – to others.

Every time we offer an open and welcoming hand in greeting or hospitality, the hand of another held in prayer, a touch of encouragement on the shoulder, a hand extended to help support someone who is unsteady or may be frail, we are passing on the touch of Jesus. Every time we reach out our hands in Communion to accept the body and blood of the Lord, we once more experience the healing touch of Jesus, for Jesus is present in that bread and cup. With every morsel and sip, we are healed and made well, a bit more whole, as God intends.

Cure for sickness and disease may or may not happen. But healing always happens with Jesus' touch. We may not see the effects in ourselves or in others, but God's Spirit is at work when we touch another or pray for someone in Jesus' name. It is a bold and faithful thing to ask for healing prayers, to receive anointing with oil as a sign of the Spirit's healing power at work. And those of us who work in caring professions and in positions as caregivers for family or others, we need often to be receiving Jesus' healing touch. Left to rely on our own strength, we so quickly become isolated and depleted. None of us has inexhaustible physical and spiritual reserves to care for another. I know you have seen it, and many of us have lived it, trying to care for others relying on our own strength alone. It doesn't work for very long. We are designed for and meant to return often to the ever-flowing, healing streams of God's goodness, mercy, and love for refreshment, renewal, and restoration. The world needs us as disciples to continue sharing Jesus' healing touch with others.

We have two sacramental opportunities today to receive more of God's grace - anointing and healing prayers and Holy Eucharist. Thanks be to God for these outward and visible signs, tangible expressions through which we can taste and see that God is good. Tangible signs to help us feel and know that all creation is good, because God has come down to be with us in human form in Jesus, the Son, healer come to restore all that separates us in ourselves, and from God and each other.

Let us pray.

Hymn - There is a Balm in Gilead  
*(sung by the preacher as a closing prayer)*

“There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin sick soul.

Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my life's in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.

If you cannot preach like Peter, and you cannot pray like Paul, just share the love of Jesus and say he died for all –

There is a balm in Gilead, to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul.”