

**The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper Eight
Holy Comforter Episcopal Church
The Rev. John E. Shields
June 28, 2009**

“Reach out and touch someone.”

Do you remember when that (“Reach out and touch someone.”) was the advertising slogan for the phone company?

There weren’t so many phone companies then. And they were trying to encourage folks to call long distance.

I wonder what a comparable slogan might be today:

“Reach out and text, twitter, blog, Skype, email, or voice mail someone.”

Life was simpler when it was just touch.

We certainly have an interesting account today of a person literally reaching out to touch someone. But first a little background.

In Mark’s gospel, we have Jesus and his disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee several times.

You may remember that last week we found Jesus and his disciples in a boat and in a storm.

In between last week’s gospel and today’s, Mark has Jesus going to the Gentile side of the lake to an area called the Gerasenes.

There Jesus meets and cures a man who was possessed by many demons. After this very dramatic episode, he now sails back to the Jewish side of the lake.

This is where today's gospel picks up.

It sounds as if there was a large crowd at the shore to meet Jesus when he arrives. And almost immediately, we have a very important religious authority named Jairus, who comes to Jesus asking for help -- his daughter is very ill.

So Jesus goes with him – and they are surrounded by a large crowd.

As they are walking to Jairus' house, there is a woman in the crowd who has been ill with hemorrhages for twelve years. She reaches out to touch Jesus' robe.

Two things happen: (1.) Jesus feels some loss of power – something has happened; and (2.) the woman feels immediate relief – her hemorrhaging has stopped.

Jesus asks – “who touched my clothes?”

The disciples – always playing their ‘clueless’ role say “...it is a huge crowd pressing on you – how can you say ‘who touched me?’”

But Jesus knew that this healing has cost him something – something of himself was now given to someone, and he wants to know who.

We need to be reminded that this woman would have been considered ritually unclean – she would not be allowed to worship in the synagogue. She was an outcast.

The woman was among the marginalized of society, because of her gender and illness.

We also need to be aware that men were not supposed to be talking to women in public.

Yet the woman -- in fear – comes before Jesus and confesses.

Jesus commends her faith and sends her away healed. He did not let religious rules or social convention stop him from giving himself to this person.

You may have thought when you heard this gospel read that we have a story within a story – you are right.

Remember that Jesus is on his way to minister to the daughter of Jairus – a ruler of the synagogue. The text notes that the girl was twelve years old – she is just now reaching the age at which young women could be betrothed.

Jairus is an important man.

Yet, Jesus has stopped to deal with a woman of no social standing – he has healed her and he has taken the time to talk with her.

After this encounter, Jesus and Jairus continue their journey to Jairus' house. But people come up to them and say it no longer necessary to continue, for the girl has died. In fact, some suggest that Jairus shouldn't trouble Jesus any further.

They also mock Jesus and laugh at him when he tells them she is not dead.

Jesus ignores them and says to Jairus, “Do not be afraid, keep believing!”

Jesus goes to the child. He reaches out and takes her by the hand. Jesus restores the little girl's life and all are amazed. (By the way, He just broke another religious rule by touching a corpse.)

So what --- Take away:

One commentary says that Mark is not simply stating the church's belief about Jesus but is also saying that the church has a mandate to behave in this way toward all persons.

So, remember that like Jesus, it will cost you something to be genuinely helpful.

Jesus doesn't let religious or social convention get in his way. Jesus blesses without partiality – Jew and Gentile, clean and unclean, near and far.

So too, you cannot let religious or social bias or prejudice stand in the way of being an instrument of God's grace.

When he is asked, Jesus responds. Every day we all have numerous opportunities to be present and with those in need or trouble – we just have to pay attention and listen and respond.

Jesus gives new life. Methodist bishop and former dean of Duke Chapel, William Willimon says, "Whenever the resurrected Jesus shows up, the dead don't stay that way."

Jesus meets despair with hope. You are never alone, as the great spiritual writer and leader Evelyn Underhill once said, "God is acting on your soul all the time, whether you have spiritual sensations or not." I remember being told once, when lamenting about the seeming lack of life in the small Episcopal mission I was serving, "Remember John, 'The only enemy is despair'."

We are called to bring life, even in the face of death. We can start by allowing Christ to touch the dead parts of our lives – something might just happen.

Jesus' response to the two women is that of sheer grace. They did not receive his blessing because they were deserving of it, but because he freely allowed himself to be used to meet their need. Grace is God's love given freely and undeservedly. We are called to be instruments of that grace whenever and wherever we are faced with the challenge.

My advice today is: If you really want to follow Jesus, then “reach out and touch someone.”