

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

June 30, 2024 (Lectionary 13, Proper 8, Year B)
Mark 5:21-43

A business executive became depressed. Things were NOT going well at work, and he was bringing his problems HOME with him every night. Every evening he would eat his dinner in silence, shutting out his wife and five-year-old daughter. Then he would go into the den and read the paper, using the newspaper to WALL out his family.

One evening, after several nights of this, his daughter took her little hand and pushed the newspaper down. She then jumped into her father's lap, wrapped her arms around his neck, and hugged him tightly. The father said, "Honey, you're hugging me to death!"

"No, Daddy," the little girl said, "I'm hugging you to LIFE!"

Aren't children great? That was the greatness of JESUS TOO. He met people where they WERE and LOVED them to LIFE. That's what we see Jesus doing in our gospel today. He's HOLDING needy and hurting people, LOVING them BACK to LIFE.

This passage is fascinating. It's unusual, because it's a story WITHIN a story, TWO healing stories rolled into one. And the people involved COULDN'T be MORE different, COMPLETE OPPOSITES. But, these TWO VASTLY different people, the down-and-out hemorrhaging woman and the upper-crust daughter of Jairus, are BOTH LOVED INTO LIFE by our Lord. Jesus doesn't SEE any DIFFERENCE. He makes no distinctions.

NOTICE what's the SAME in BOTH stories. Notice HOW Jesus heals. He's no "wand-waver," who stands at a distance mouthing magic words; he TOUCHES them. We know that he CAN heal at a distance, with just a THOUGHT, and sometimes he DOES that, but the Gospels SHOW us that he PREFERS to TOUCH us.

The hemorrhaging woman touches his cloak, and it says, "immediately her *bleeding* stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease," and Jesus was "immediately aware that power had gone forth from him." In the midst of this crowd PRESSING in on him, ALL of them were touching him, but Christ FELT the touch of ONE person.

Don't ever say that, in the ENORMITY of the cosmos, God COULDN'T care about YOU and YOUR problems. Even in a crowd, Jesus felt the pain of ONE hurting person, and his touch LOVED her back to life.

And NOTICE what happens next. He COULD have let her GO. She ONLY CAME to him to be HEALED. She GOT what she WANTED, and she was TRYING to slip away. And it was a bustling crowd, and nobody NOTICED that anything had HAPPENED, ANYWAY. And Jesus WAS on the WAY to help someone ELSE. He COULD have just let her GO. Why DIDN'T he let her go? HEALING her COULD have been ENOUGH, but instead he CALLED for her. He wanted to KNOW her, and for HER to know HIM.

It WASN'T ENOUGH for Jesus to simply HEAL a person. And it STILL ISN'T. He wants a RELATIONSHIP with us, he wants us to KNOW him.

And then the story RETURNS to the family he'd ORIGINALLY been on the WAY to help, the SECOND healing. Alone in a room with a dead child and a distraught mother and father, He reaches out his hand. He takes the CHILD'S hand and TOUCHES her. "[Jesus] said to her, 'Little girl, get up!'" And she rises. She lives. A TOUCH, and AGAIN, Jesus LOVED her back to life.

You see, touch matters. Do you know what happens to a child who ISN'T touched? In a South American orphanage, Rene Spitz observed and recorded what happened to 97 children who were deprived of emotional and physical contact with others. Because of a lack of funds, there wasn't enough staff to adequately care for these children, ages 3 months to 3 years old. Nurses changed diapers and fed and bathed the children, but that's all. There wasn't enough time to hold, cuddle, and

talk to them as a mother would. After three months, many of them showed signs of abnormality. Besides a loss of appetite and being unable to sleep well, many of the children lay with a vacant expression in their eyes. After five months, serious deterioration set in. They lay whimpering, with troubled and twisted faces. Often, when a doctor or nurse would pick up an infant, it would scream in terror.

In the first year, 27 of the children died, almost one third of them, but not from lack of food or health care. They died from a lack of touch and emotional connection. Because of this, 7 more died in the second year. In all, only 21 of the 97 children survived, with most of them suffering serious psychological damage.

Contrast that with this story. The Menninger Institute in Topeka, Kansas did an experiment. They identified a group of crib babies who didn't cry. Babies cry because they instinctively know that this is the way to get attention. Crying is their way of calling out. THESE babies, however, had been in abusive situations. Their parents let them cry for hours on end and never responded. So eventually, the babies QUIT crying. It was almost as if they had learned that it wasn't worth trying.

So, the Menninger Institute came in for an experiment. They got some people from retirement and nursing homes, and every day these elders HELD the babies and rocked them. The object was to get the babies to start crying again. And you know what, it worked. Physical touch made the difference. Those old folks LOVED the children back to life.

We are LIKE those children. We NEED to be touched, ESPECIALLY by GOD. We are a people in NEED of healing, who CRAVE healing. We WANT to be healed of our aches and pains, of our infirmities, of our diseases and dis-ease. We NEED to be healed of our brokenness. Our LIVES are broken. Many of our relationships are broken. Evidence of a broken WORLD is all around us. Oh, HOW we NEED to be TOUCHED. We plead, "HEAL US TOO, Jesus!"

And Jesus MEETS us in our pain, and reaches out his hand to US, and touches us, and loves US back to life.

God is able. God...is...able. The one, who is able to raise the dead and heal the sick with just the touch of his clothes ... is able to heal US. He's able to turn our lives around. He's able to strengthen our faith, or maybe give us just ENOUGH strength for ONE more day. He's able to MAKE us the people we want to be. And He's able to TAKE this small gathering of believers and TURN us into the body of Christ.

That touch can take on a lot of DIFFERENT FORMS. Sometimes it's a kind word from a FRIEND, or a comforting touch on the shoulder. We need help. We NEED one ANOTHER. Sometimes it's PHYSICAL help. Sometimes it's EMOTIONAL help – companionship and support. Sometimes it's just TIME SPENT with us. But if you have ever RECEIVED that comfort, then you KNOW that friend was the HAND of GOD.

And JESUS REMINDS us that we ALSO need SPIRITUAL help – MORE than we even KNOW, or more than we may want to ADMIT. We NEED GOD'S MERCY. We need God to come into our lives and make us whole. We need God to WALK with us, and LEAD us through the tough times. We need JESUS to TOUCH us.

This morning, Jesus is reaching out his arms to US. HERE, at HIS TABLE, he TOUCHES us. He GIVES us this meal, because he KNOWS that we NEED to be touched. He SEES our pain. He FEELS it. Like that woman in the crowd, he SEEKS us, and he FINDS us.

We say, "Don't bother, Jesus. I'm not worth the effort. I'm ALREADY DEAD. I'm TOO far gone."

But he takes you by the hand and says, "No, my child, I already took CARE of DEATH. I'm LOVING you back to LIFE! Little one, get up! Go in peace, and be healed." Amen.