

Just One Touch...

What does it mean to be vulnerable? The definition of vulnerable is to be “susceptible to physical or emotional attack or harm”. Is it possible to be vulnerable without trust? Is it possible to be vulnerable without surrender?

In today’s gospel we hear two distinct, yet intertwined stories of vulnerability and trust. The first story we hear about is Jairus’s daughter. We do not know her name. What we do know is she is very sick, and quite likely dying. Jairus will do whatever he can do to save his daughter’s life. And so this powerful man of great authority throws himself to his knees and literally begs Jesus for his daughter’s life. Jesus agrees to follow Jairus but, before they can get there, “a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him.” (Mark 5.24, NRSV)

We then move into the story of the woman suffering with hemorrhages for twelve years. We also do not know her name. She has been to countless doctors and spent all the money she had and still has no diagnosis, treatment, or relief. She is desperate. She has been bleeding heavily for most of her adult life and is at her wit’s end. Like Jairus, she is desperate for Jesus to help her.

The Woman has been chronically ill for a very long time. It is exhausting to live with chronic pain or chronic illness. The simplest things take extraordinary energy and even a minor injury feels catastrophic as all pain receptors are working in overdrive.

On her hands and knees she crawls through this massive crowd. She is getting stepped on. She is moving slowly forward, stretching her arms out before her. “She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.’” (Mark 5.27-28, NRSV) She had been ill for so long that she pinned all her hope and faith in this itinerant preacher from Nazareth. She touched him and felt in her body that her hemorrhages had stopped. The aches and pains she had lived with stopped and she felt her strength returning. Just one touch of Jesus’ robe and she was healed.

All the money she had spent on doctors, and with just one touch of Jesus' robe she was healed. She felt her body returning to how it had been before her hemorrhages began.

She had taken a massive risk in reaching out, literally, to be healed. In those days a woman who was bleeding was considered unclean and would have to isolate herself with other women. She certainly would not be allowed to touch any man, and yet, she was so desperate to be healed and her faith was so strong in Jesus, that she risked everything - including her life - in order to be healed.

As she's feeling the strength returning to her body Jesus calls out "Who touched my clothes." (Mark 5.30, NRSV) Jesus had felt "power" leaving him to heal her and so he asked who had touched him. His disciples thought it impossible to know with so many people in the crowd, all pressing upon him.

Taking another great risk the woman stood up; terrified, she fell at Jesus' feet and told him all about what had happened to her. With twelve years of illness and countless doctors, the tale likely took more than a few minutes. She had no idea how Jesus or the crowd would react. Jesus could banish her because she was unclean and he may have felt she had made HIM unclean. The punishment for her deception would be stoning. She was risking her life which, until a few moments ago, had hardly been worth living.

Yet instead of punishment, Jesus assured her "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." (Mark 5.34, NRSV) He didn't really need to say anything to her. She knew she had been healed. He knew he had healed her. I suspect he said what he did, because he wanted the crowd to hear that she had been healed. Not to glorify himself but to release her from the cloud and stigma of her illness, her "unclean-ness".

If the community knew she was bleeding, she would be shunned or stoned as she would be considered unclean and impure. Jesus saw her, truly SAW her in her healed state and knew she would now have a good life. She was healed, because she believed. She was returned to wholeness because she was vulnerable. Because she took an incredible risk. Just one touch...

Now, while ALL of this is unfolding Jairus is still waiting for Jesus to come to his home. This time would have been excruciating to him. He should be at his daughter's side and he's stuck in the crowd with some woman who had the unmitigated gall to come to Jesus in an unclean state and touch him!

If you've ever waited on a specialist's appointment, or waited for medical tests to come back, you can appreciate how Jairus is feeling. If you've ever received a call to get to hospital immediately, because someone you love has been in an accident, you know how he's feeling. Time is of the essence. He needs to get to his daughter. But he has to wait because he cannot heal his daughter himself. Just one touch...

In the distance he sees some people from his household approaching. Jairus has been waiting an indeterminate amount of time, only to be told that his daughter has died. He's told there's no point in bothering the teacher anymore; he may as well just come home and begin the period of mourning.

Except, that Jesus has overheard what was said to Jairus and he says to him "Do not fear, only believe." (Mark 5.36, NRSV) Jairus has tremendous faith to seek out an unknown rabbi (this was early in Jesus' ministry) who would be able to heal his daughter. Jairus is taking a great risk. His reputation. Jairus is a well respected leader of the synagogue. What is he doing prostrating himself before this nobody from nowhere?

Yet, Jesus knows that Jairus has been waiting a very long time and brings only James, Peter and John. As they approach Jairus' house the mourning lament and wailing has begun. Jesus, knowing full well what is happening, asks what they are doing as the child is not dead, only sleeping. And the crowd assembled laughs at Jesus. They don't believe him.

He sends everyone home, save for Peter, James, John, Jairus and the child's mother. They go into her room. She is still as though dead. Jesus takes her hand and says gently "Talitha cum" which means "little girl, get up". It's a form of affection, calling her "little girl". It would be as though someone today said "Okay sweetie, time to sit up".

And just like that, she did. With one touch from Jesus, she was returned to life.

She got up, moved around like any twelve year old girl, and her overjoyed parents stood open-mouthed and awe-struck. Then Jesus told them to feed their daughter and not tell anyone what they had witnessed. Remember, the crowd has been disbursed, so they won't be hearing anything about this. They've already gone home.

Have any of you ever been that vulnerable? Have you ever given everything over to God in order that your child or spouse be healed?

We don't hear of these stories anymore, which is not to say they no longer happen. It simply means we don't hear of them.

Vulnerability is difficult because it means surrendering control. And you know I rarely, if ever, surrender control.

I believe in God. I trust in God. I love God. I believe in the power of prayer. I wonder if my refusal to fully surrender means my faith is weak? I hope not...I hope it means that my faith is strong, yet I cannot concede control. Why can't I concede control? I think that's something to discuss at my next counseling appointment.

Both Jairus and the Woman with hemorrhages knew something with absolute certainty: that Jesus had the power to heal. Their collective faith meant that Jairus' daughter and, in turn, the Woman with hemorrhages, were healed and returned to wholeness.

My prayer for you is that you have the strength of Jairus and the Woman with hemorrhages; that you can be vulnerable enough; and take a big enough risk, to lay all doubt and fear aside...and simply have faith.

Imagine how different our lives would be...

Imagine how different our communities would be...

Imagine how different our world would be...

if we had the faith that with just one touch, we too, would be healed.

Amen.

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Mark 5.21-43
Sermon for 27 June 2021
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost