

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 4, 2018

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Dr. James C. Pace

Year B: 2 Kings 4:18–21, 32–37; Psalm 142; 1 Corinthians 9:16–23; Mark 1:29–39*

Last week I went to see my dermatologist for my usual 6-month checkup. A reminder that I grew up under the Florida sun and so I keep her very busy. But it was the first time in my 7 years with her, where, before the exam began, she asked: “May I touch you?” She’s never asked me that before. And then I got it. In a world where there is way too much “bad touch” there is now clear and certain need for consent.

Though minor in comparison, I see the impact of bad touch as it relates to my two little dogs. Dogs are built with four legs (barring anomalies, of course). They don’t come equipped with arms for personal protection. And so they just stand there or sit there and all they want you to do to them is to love and pet them. But never to hit them. Of my two dogs, one has never known bad touch, only good. She has been with us since almost her birth. Chelsea will wag her tail and her whole body and will saunter up to any and everybody until the person will finally reach down and pet her. My other little dog, Jazz, was apparently

abused by her first owners as a puppy. She is still people shy and suspects anyone, especially men, who reach down to her, she thinks they are going to try to hurt her. Bad memories, I guess.

And so let's now move to and concentrate on good touch. One of my favorite songs has a lot to do with the beauties of good touch. It's a song by Roberta Flack called, "The First Time ever I saw your face." The lyrics simply lead you into the wonder and beauty of touch between two people. With her soulful, strong voice, Flack sings about how the power of touch totally changes people's lives. With this kind of touch, the earth moves under one's feet, joy fills the earth, and the moon and the stars—well, they reveal God's glory.

In the Episcopal Church, we have sacraments that involve good touch. Very soon, on Ash Wednesday, ashes will be administered to our foreheads. Clergy will not ask you first if we can touch you. Coming forward, I suppose, implies your full consent for us to do so. Similarly, at our healing services, holy oil is anointed to the same location where the ashes are targeted and hands are often laid on one's head for healing. There is an outcome of that touch that

imparts a very intimate encounter with the healing, sustaining, and upholding power of the Lord Christ. Additionally, the sacraments of confirmation and ordination all involve the laying on of hands by a bishop: outer and visible signs of inward and spiritual graces.

We do know that touch transfers energy. The realities of that transference are supported by scientific evidence. I'm proud to say that the NYU Nursing School in the 70's was way ahead of its time in this regard. Under the direction of Dr. Dolores Krieger, the power of therapeutic lies in its abilities to redirect, channel, and cleanse the body's energy fields. In a research study that was probably the first of its kind, they compared blood samples of patients who received therapeutic touch to those who did not. Patients who were administered TT had significantly higher hgb levels. Similarly, nursing research has been implemented in neonatal ICUs to the tiniest of little souls who lie alone in their incubators swaddled with tubes and lines rather than in their mother's arms. Nurses who administered higher "doses" of soothing touch throughout the day and night to such critically ill preemies saw those babies have healthier clinical and

emotional outcomes than those not similarly touched in those same ways.

In the Gospel today, we see the power of Jesus' touch. It is a small incident in Jesus' healing ministry where Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law of a fever. There is no indication that this fever was life-threatening in any way. Seems to have been a common, ordinary fever. This healing cannot compare with Lazarus' coming out of the tomb following a four-day death, or the casting out of a nest of evil spirits from a demoniac and sending them into a herd of swine. It pales in regard to the healing of leprosy, congenital blindness, the healing of a paralytic or the regeneration of withered limbs. Such miraculous healings awesomely proclaim Jesus' authority over disease and death. Yet Mark, for good reason, includes this little healing in his Gospel and we are grateful.

I quote: "Jesus came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. And the fever left her. And she began to serve them."

Even a little fever, which may have resolved itself on its own in a day or so, is of concern to Jesus. No one should suffer one minute longer than he or she has to.

And in whatever way we suffer that is of a concern to us, it is also a concern to Jesus. Jesus reached out and touched her. This act lifted her up. It made her well. And this particular healing was not only for her own benefit, it was for the well-being and nurture of the community of faith. Jesus, Andrew, Simon, James and John were then able to benefit by the services she was then able to offer them. The community needed her care and attention; illness prevented her from her service to others. No healing is too small, or too large, for God. Healing and wholeness are inseparable from mission. All of us build the kingdom together and God's touch sustains us. Even in ... especially in ordinary, day to day situations.

A final musing. Today's Gospel made me think of one of my favorite prayers in the Prayer book titled *In the Evening*. It is a prayer that not only greets the arrival of the evening shadows at the close of any given day, but it is also prayer that allegorically paints the tapestry of our lives from start to finish. Most of our life trajectory is spent in the hustle bustle of our work. And then, before we know it, the fever of life cools, the busyness is quieted, and our work is done. I quote:

O Lord, support us all the day long until the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then, in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last.

And so. Support us, Lord Christ, all of our lives with your healing touch. Our lives are continually touched by your grace, your love, and your intimacy. Every illness, every condition, every joy and satisfaction is subject to God's concerns. In a few moments, the bread of life will be placed in our hands and the cup of salvation to our lips. Let us feel the touch.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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