

## A Touch and A Word

### Mark 1:21-39

Many of you may be familiar the song performed by Jackie Wilson...*I'll be Satisfied*. The lyrics say:

Just a kiss, just a smile  
Hold my hand, baby  
Just once in a while.  
That's all need, that's all I need  
And I'll be satisfied!

Think of me when you're away  
Call me darling  
Just once a day  
That's all need, that's all I need  
And I'll be satisfied!

True love came to me when I met you  
True love makes me know I won't forget you  
When you're around me, it makes me feel  
Life is worth living, baby, love is so forgiving!

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I know that our scripture passage is not about Jackie Wilson's fascination for his new love, but it is about Jesus' touch and Jesus' words; Jesus' message and Jesus' actions. Note the sequence of Jesus' healing miracles in Mark's Gospel. The first miracle took place in the synagogue, where Jesus was teaching. Remember, this was at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. In Mark's account, it was

Jesus' first exorcism. When a man, possessed by "an unclean spirit," rudely interrupted, Jesus casted the demon from the man. The crowd exclaimed, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (Mark 1:27). Mark wrote, "Immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon" (1:29), whose mother-in-law lay sick with a fever. "He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her." Jesus' "teaching" ministries and "healing" ministries were a part of the same ministry. Within the same week that he called the disciples to follow him, announcing that the "kingdom of God is at hand" and launching his public ministry, Jesus had already established the pattern for his future ministry. There was no discrepancy between what he preached and what he practiced. In fact, those who study the ancient languages draw a close parallel between "healing" and "salvation." The last verse of our passage makes clear the connection between preaching and healing: "And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons" (1:39).

Jesus, like the author of Job before him, rejected the tendency to consider sickness as God's punishment for sin. On the contrary, Jesus' understanding seems compatible with our contemporary understanding of illness as un-wholeness, and of healing as the bringing about of wholeness. After all, what is the function of medicine, of psychotherapy, or of religion, for that matter, if it is not to restore intended wholeness? When Jesus said to the woman who pushed her way through the crowd, simply to touch the hem of his garment, "Daughter, your faith has made you well ["whole"]" (5:34), it was to reclaim the health in her that had been "broken" or somehow "lost."

We cannot dismiss as insignificant the number of times the Scriptures refer to touching. In the text, Jesus came and took Peter's mother-in-law by the hand and lifted her up and the fever left her. Throughout both testaments—the angel who

touches the hollow of Jacob's thigh; Jairus' daughter; the blind man whom Jesus "touched," and so many others—there is one incident after another pointing to the power of touch. It might even be said that in Scripture touch is 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" (cf. Gen. 2:18). Similarly, 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. One recent experiment was designed to test the efficacy of prayer on patients suffering from comparable illnesses. The members of one group, located on the east coast, were each assigned the name of an ill person on the west coast with whom they were not acquainted and instructed to pray every day for the person's health. The members of the other group were each given the name of an ill person whom they knew personally and who was a member of their own church. Similar instructions were given, to pray for the ill people every day. The patients who had no intimate relationship with their prayer partner showed no significant difference in improvement from the general public, whereas members of the group who had developed a social relationship with their prayer partners indicated a decided difference in improvement and quality of life.

Gerald May, a medical doctor who practices psychotherapy in Washington, DC, writes of the importance of community in the healing process:

God's grace through community involves something far greater than other people's support and perspective. The power of grace is nowhere as brilliant nor as mystical as in communities of faith. Its power includes not just love that comes from people and through people but love that pours forth among people, as if

through the very spaces between one person and next. Just to be in such an atmosphere is to be bathed in healing power.

Jesus "came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her." The power of touch, of intimacy, of nearness, to make whole: Jesus must have understood that which we are too often too slow to comprehend. Love not expressed, love not felt, is difficult to trust. Theologically speaking, that is the reason for incarnation. God knew the human need for nearness. Jesus is the incarnation of God's love, which makes it all the more demanding (if frightening) to realize that for some people, we are the only Jesus they will ever meet.

Another physician, Richard Selzer, has written of the miracle of touch:

I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face post-operative, her mouth twisted—palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed ... to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had cut the little nerve. The young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private.... "Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks. "Yes," I say, "it will. It is because the nerve was cut." She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. "I like it," he says. "It is kind of cute." He bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close that I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate her, to show her that their kiss still works.... I hold my breath and let the wonder in. **P. C.**

### **Enniss**

So often I think we are afraid to speak to people, especially in wheelchairs because they may ask us to do something that is uncomfortable, their request may be something that we may find difficult to grant. However, with Jesus as our example, we can reach out to others. Most of the time their request is not that you heal them, but that you see their humanity and interact with them with grace, respect and dignity. Jesus touched people. He gave them words of hope. We too

can give a touch and a word in Jesus' name. That's all I need, that's all I need, and I'll be satisfied!

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 1:  
Advent through Transfiguration.