

A HEALING TOUCH

“As soon as they left the synagogue. . . .”

If you were here in church last Sunday, you’ll likely remember what had just happened at that synagogue Jesus was leaving

Jesus had an encounter there with a man possessed with an unclean spirit.

Well, actually it was more than a mere encounter. It was a battle—a one-sided, “no contest” fight with a demon that Jesus had won without breaking much of a sweat.

It’s great when the good guys win. It’s even better when the good guys win handily.

Jesus won the battle with the bad guy demon handily.

So he and his four new disciples—Simon (not yet christened with the name Peter) and his brother Andrew, and James and his brother John—decided to go to Simon and Andrew’s house.

Maybe they wanted to celebrate with a meal—break out the salted fish, the barley bread and some wine and toast their victory over evil.

Or maybe Jesus just wanted to take a nap. His victory over the unclean spirit may have been won handily, but who knows how much power he’d had to utilize to emerge victorious. Maybe our Lord was tired and wanted to borrow Simon and Andrew’s sofa for a while.

But the sofa was taken.

Simon’s mother-in-law wasn’t feeling well. She was laid up with a fever.

No mother-in-law jokes will be inserted here. Besides, I get the feeling that Simon’s mother-in-law didn’t fit the usual stereotype, the “monster-in-law” caricature that’s so common today.

Now, in Jesus’ day, women were clearly the servants of the household. But Simon’s mother-in-law was ailing, and Simon’s wife was seemingly out of the picture (whenever I read this story I often wonder where Simon’s wife was).

Anyway, there were no women available there in the house to serve the boys.

How tragic!

But wait a minute. There’s hope. You see, Jesus had a way with ill

people. He had this knack for making the sick well again. So his disciples went up to him and told him about Simon's poor mother-in-law. Maybe it was Simon himself who made the official request.

"Lord, isn't there something you can do for my wife's ill mother?

Well, as a matter of fact, there was something he could do.

Jesus walked over to Simon's mother-in-law, laying there with a fever and probably feeling miserable. Maybe she thought to herself, "What do you want, Jesus? Please go away. You can get your own cheese and crackers."

But Jesus didn't go away. Instead, he took Simon's mother-in-law by the hand.

And he lifted her up.

Then the fever left her. Immediately. Gone. Jesus was better than Tylenol! He made her better with just a touch!

A healing touch

Aren't there times when you wish Jesus would do that for you? Or for someone you love? To have the Lord reach out and heal you or a loved one with just a touch?

Or, maybe even better, don't you wish you could do that?

Heal someone with a mere touch? Restore them to wellness just by taking their hand in ours, or caressing their face, or giving them a hug?

Well, who's to say we can't do that? Who's to say we're not healers?

Now, before I go any further, I need to clarify something. When I talk about you or me healing someone with a touch, I'm not talking about "curing" a disease. There's a difference between "curing" someone who is ailing and "healing" them. A person can be healed without necessarily being cured.

You see, in my mind, to heal is to take something that's broken and make it whole again. And brokenness in a human being isn't necessarily physical. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that most brokenness in human beings isn't physical.

For example, someone who has terminal cancer is sick. They're physically ailing. But there's a pretty good chance that they're also broken. Maybe they have a broken spirit—the hopes for their life and their dreams for the future are shattered.

Or maybe their faith has been crushed. Why would God let this happen to me? Doesn't God care? Doesn't God love me? Or does God even exist?

Or perhaps their joy is in pieces on the ground because of their cancer. The anguish and pain they feel is never-ending. They weep and grieve

because they believe their life, for all intents and purposes, is over. So many words left unsaid, so many things left undone. No happy times to look forward to. Only more and greater suffering ahead.

That's human brokenness. Human brokenness isn't the cancer; it's the emotional and spiritual damage that's the result of the cancer.

I believe you and I can help heal such brokenness. Even if the cancer itself is incurable. With a touch, we can help to heal an ailing person's spirit and offer them the amazing hope that their life, their future are far from over. We Christians call such hope Eternal Life. Everlasting life.

With a touch, we can help to heal a physically ill person's faith by being a sign of God's love for them. By our presence in their lives and our compassionate support, we're letting it be known that we care about them and we love them. And we're also reassuring them that, through us, God cares about and God loves them, too. God hasn't abandoned or forgotten them. We're tangible evidence of that.

And with a touch, we can help to heal their grief and pain, because when they're reassured that we and God care about them and love them, it's a great relief and a powerful source of comfort. They're lifted up knowing that they don't walk through the shadowy valley of their terrible sickness by themselves. And they receive strength and encouragement when they know they don't have to go through their trials and troubles all alone.

We're there with them. And God is there for them. Sharing that good news through our words and by our actions is how we can bring a healing touch to others in their times of trial.

Many of you know that I used to be a volunteer on-call chaplain for the Maine Medical Center. I no longer am, although I can see myself doing it again someday.

For three years, on the first Wednesday of every month, beginning at 5 p.m. and ending the next morning at 8 a.m., I used to carry a pager device and wait for a possible call (sometimes I received more than one) to go to the hospital and minister to a patient or the family members of a patient.

On my very first evening on call, I was paged to go to the neo-natal unit. An infant had been born very prematurely and wasn't expected to live very long. The parents wanted me to come and bless their child before the child died.

I'm telling you, during the entire drive up I-295 and Congress Street, I did some serious talking with God. Please, Lord, give me the right words to speak. Show me the right things to do. Help me be able to minister to the parents in this heartbreaking situation so they can experience at least a tiny measure of comfort. Or, at the very least, keep me from making some kind

of stupid mistake that will cause the mother and father to forever regret that they had asked a hospital chaplain to come.

I entered the hospital room, and there in the bed sat a young woman, cradling and gently rocking an incredibly tiny newborn, who was wrapped up snugly in a blanket. Although the mother's eyes were still red from the tears she had shed earlier, at that moment she looked surprisingly calm. It was obvious that she had come to accept the inevitable loss of her baby.

The newborn's father, on the other hand, was sitting huddled in a chair over in a far corner of the hospital room, looking dazed and grief-struck.

I walked over to the mother and expressed my sorrow. She thanked me and said, "I want you to bless our daughter before she leaves us."

"Does she have a name?" I asked.

"Yes," said the mother. "This is Gwyneth."

I drew close to mother and child, reached out my hand and gently placed it on Gwyneth's forehead. I offered a prayer of blessing and asked God to receive Gwyneth into Everlasting Life, where her parents would meet her again one day. Then I prayed that Gwyneth's parents might be comforted and assured that, even in the midst of their sorrow, God was present, loved them, and would walk with them through the loss of their infant daughter.

The mother thanked me and went back to cradling Gwyneth and rocking her gently into God's eternal care. I walked over to the father and asked if there was something I could do for him. Would he like to talk?

He shook his head no and thanked me for coming.

I had been there for maybe about ten minutes; but ministers sometimes get a sense of when it's time to leave, and I had gotten that sense. I had blessed Gwyneth as her parents had requested. Now they just wanted to be alone with their daughter in the last minutes of her life. I left the room and went home.

In the midst of my own strong emotions and my hope that I had adequately ministered to those parents, deep in my heart I believed that God had been present during my hospital visit.

Now, as you probably have already surmised, in spite of my blessing of Gwyneth, and my conviction that God was present in that hospital room, Gwyneth wasn't "cured." At some point that evening, she died in her mother's arms. But I can tell you that, without a doubt, just as surely as I'm standing here in this pulpit, a healing took place. I could feel it when I laid my hand on Gwyneth's forehead and offered a prayer and a blessing. I could sense it in the peaceful expression on her mother's face.

Even in the midst of the deep grief and pain that that enveloped the entire visit, healing occurred. Healing in the form of comfort and reassurance that the Lord deeply loved Gwyneth and would receive her into his arms and care for her, even after she died.

Yes, I believe with all my heart that the risen Christ was powerfully present during my visit, and it humbles me to think that he had reached out and touched tiny Gwyneth and his mother through me.

He reached out to them with a healing touch.

My dear friends, in this mortal life, suffering and sorrow are an inevitable, unavoidable reality. If suffering hasn't touched us directly, it has probably touched us indirectly, through the suffering and grief of a loved one of ours.

The Good News is, we don't have to go through that suffering and sorrow alone; and we don't have to rely solely on our own strength to get us through it. Because, as I said in last week's sermon, wherever there is pain or grief; wherever there are agonizing crosses to bear, there is the Lord, who reaches out to us, takes our hand, and heals our brokenness.

And after we experience Christ's healing touch, we will be able to rise from our sick beds, as Simon's mother-in-law did, and go forth to serve others. Amen.