Book of

Sunday February 16, 1975

"WHO TOUCHED ME?" Mark 5:25-34

"Who touched me?" It seems almost a foolish question considering the circumstances, and the disciples said just that. "You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you asked, "Who touched me?" But Jesus was not thinking of the swarms of people crowding in on him. Someone had deliberately touched him.

As he searched the people around him, his eyes came upon a woman kneeling at his feet with terror and ecstasy written all over her face. Something tremendous had just happened to her. She had been healed.

This woman, according to the Gospels, had been afflicted with a continual hemorrhage for twelve years and no one could cure her. She had tried all sorts of treatments and spent her money on every kind of doctor, but if anything she had gotten worse instead of better. Perhaps by this time she secretly felt she was incurable, marked out for a lifetime of suffering. But she hadn't given up completely.

The nature of her ailment was particularly degrading in the Israel of Jesus' day, because women with flows of blood were considered to be "unclean," literally untouchable. So she really took courage in her hands when she touched the robe of well-known rabbi.

This may be one of the reasons why she did not confront Jesus directly and ask for help. She was afraid of being rejected. She had a certain reluctance about asking for the complete attention of the healer. She only wanted to touch the hem of his garment so if it wasn't the right thing to do she wouldn't be held accountable or be punished. And if her attempt failed, she hadn't lost much.

But Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" He asked this question for several reasons. First, he noticed that the touch had drained some power from him and therefore he wanted to see who it was that wanted help so desperately. He sensed that the person who touched him needed something more than just physical healing. So when the woman identified herself, Jesus spoke words of reassurance to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease."

Like all the persons who met Jesus, this woman has a universal timeless quality. She mirrors human nature and thus her meeting with Jesus has a lot to say to us.

1. First, note her long illness. All the Gospel writers include this story, but none specifies the exact nature of her disease beyond the fact of telling us that she had a flow of blood for twelve years. Today she might have had a hysterectomy, but such surgery was unknown in that time. Women simply suffered. And any woman can imagine the extent of her suffering, the inconvenience and embarrassment, and the sense of despair as she felt her strength ebbing away.

Her own physician had declared himself baffled by it, so she tried anohter physician and another and another and got no positive results but an accumulation of medical expenses.

It's a terrible thing to suffer from a lingering illness, one that should allow of a cure and which doctors do their best to cure, but which gets only progressively worse. We all know people who have been afflicted in this way. It's hard to handle. A long sickness can be a debilitating process, both for the patient and those around her--her family, friends and those who care for her. In the process the patient often becomes less than a person, almost a thing. Sympathy is easy at first, but as the ailment drags on year after year sympathy, tolerance and sometimes even humanity dry up for the one who is sick.

So this woman needed more than physical healing. She needed also to be accepted as a person.

2. Note second, the timidness of the woman which was no doubt related to her long illness. She had a low sense of worth. Also, in touching only the hem of Jesus' garment she reminds us of those who want to be healed or helped in someway, but who are still afraid to ask.

She was so afraid that if someone had said to her, "Of course, Jesus can help you. Come along. I'll introduce you to him,"she would have run away in the opposite direction as fast as her weak legs could carry her. She had heard of Christ and of what he had done for other people. Now she thought it possible that he might do something for her, but she had to approach him in her own way and on her own terms. "If I touch even his garments," she thought,

"I shall be made well." She had a lot of faith in spite of her timidness.

But there are a number of aspects to this kind of timidity. Some people are afraid to commit themselves fully to a course of action because they are afraid their efforts may fail. And others are afraid to be claimed by anything outside themselves. They want to be free of all commitments even if it means bleeding alone.

No doubt this woman felt unworthy to claim the full attention of the healer. She wasn't important enough or good enough, she thought, to take his time or to ask for anything. So she would just touch him without his knowing it,

There are many persons who feel this way. People will say, "You're so busy, I hate to bother you." It may be politeness, but it can also be that the person is implying that she is not important enough to take up someone else's time.

And on the other side, the problem with some of us may be that we think some people are not important enough to take up our time. We have to be especially on guard against this attitude in our time as our world often becomes more impersonal and crowded.

If we're not careful we will take on the characteristics of the many machines we have to deal with each day. Indeed in our age of computers and technology, some people get the feeling that they are at the mercy of impersonal forces over which they have little or no control.

One person in poetry, put it this way:

The people up in personnel, they have a set of cards on me.
The sprinkled perforations tell my individuality.
And what am I? I am a chart on the cards of IBM.
The secret places of the heart have little secrecy for them.
It matters not how much I prate, they punch with punish-
  ment the scroll.
The files are masters of my fate, they are the captains
  of my soul.
Monday my brain began to buzz, I was in agony all night.
I found out what the trouble was, they had my paper
  clip too tight!

Regardless of technology however, some people like the women who touched the hem of Christ's garment, have a need for the time being to stay on the periphery. They're not ready to come any farther.

I talked not long ago to an usher in another church and he told me about a stranger standing at the entrance of the church each Sunday and apparently participating in the service of worship from a distance. The usher had seen this person on several Sundays and noticed that invariably he took up the same position--a regular worshipper, but never advancing beyond the narthex into the main body of the church. In Christian friendliness the usher approached him and said, "Let me take you to a seat." Whereupon the stranger turned and walked out of the building and never came back.

The usher said, I suppose I made a mistake, I should have left him alone. He didn't want to come any closer for the present at least. What the man's problem was is not known. But he reminds me of the woman who touched the hem of Christ's robe.

3. But note thirdly that Jesus accepted the woman in spite of her timid approach and her fear. When we reach out to touch God, God accepts us, no matter how timidly we approach. God pays attention. Jesus noticed the slight touch.

Furthermore, not only did Jesus see the real need and worth of the woman, he healed her of her sickness. And more than that, he freed her from her feelings of inferiority and unworthiness. He called her forth from her hiding place and confirmed her as a person. He acknowledged her faith and determination

Yet this is not just a story about a woman who lived some 2000 years ago and met Jesus and had her life changed. It is also a story about you and me.

People all around us are hesitantly reaching out not only to touch God, but to touch us and get our attention. And people often experience God's love through their relationship with others.

Yet because many are timid, or feel unworthy, or are afraid, many times the touch is often light or subtle and not

straightforward and we do not notice it. We miss the little signals that say, "Be my friend," or "I need your help," or "I'm lonely," or "Pay attention to me," or "I'm afraid," or "Listen to me."

I remember once in a former parish a woman who needed very much to talk to someone but she was too timid to say straight out, "I need help. I want to come and talk with you about my problems." Whatever signals she gave, I had missed.

One day she telephoned my home and I wasn't there so she talked for a while on the phone with my wife. At the end of the conversation, she said to my wife, "By the way, tell your husband that I'm quitting the church." Well, that got my attention. I telephoned her later that day and we made an appointment to talk together personally and in the conversation she poured out her story of loneliness, anxiety and family problems. She didn't quit the church. It was her way of signaling for help. And it worked.

All around there are people who are touching us and who need to be touched back by us. Our attention, our touch can call forth healing powers in people who need help.

In his book THE CREATIVE YEARS, Reuel Howe tells the true story of a girl named Jane Foster who on the eve of her marriage had collapsed and the wedding had to be postphoned indefinitely. As days passed her condition grew worse and she went into such a deep depression she had to be put into a mental hospital. Even there she deteriorated until she would do nothing for herself. She simply sat in a corner, day after day, looking at the floor, a pathetic contrast to the bright creature she used to be.

One day, the head of the Hospital told an artist who was painting his portrait about this patient. The artist asked if he could see Jane and it was arranged. There she sat in her corner with all signs of animation and creativity gone.

The artist stood there for a moment and then moved slowly towards her, at the same time drawing something from his pocket. Then he stooped down and held out his hand, under her apparently unseeing eyes, a lump of clay that he gently molded with his fingers. There was no indication of response from the girl; in a few moments he rose to his feet

and went out with the doctor. "Can I come and visit Jane regularly?"he asked. I'd like to try to reach her.

Permission was granted and each time the artist came to visit he repeated the routine of his first visit. He would hold out his hand and gently work the clay before Jane's eyes. Then one day she timidly reached out her hand and touched the clay. On another of his visits, she took the clay in her hands. Later she took the clay and closed her fingers around it; and when she opened them, she looked wonderingly at the impression she had made on the clay.

Visit followed visit and each time there was a little more response. Then one day she worked the clay with both hands, slowly and hesitantly. But never during all this time did she lift her head or look at the artist. Her appearance continued to be that of one afraid.

In all these weeks, the artist had not spoken to Jane either, but had trusted only in what he could say through his presence and actions. Finally, one day when she was working the clay into rude shapes, he spoke her name softly, "Jane." Her hands paused, her head came up slowly and with caution she looked at him, the first person she had looked at for months. But yet she did not speak, nor did she smile. But as time went on she became less afraid and more trusting.

The lump of clay, however had become a bond between them and now the artist was helping her to work it into more complex forms. She seemed to be trying to shape something that would not come. She became increasingly tense and irritable. Finally she threw the clay down on the table where they were working and hit it angrily with her clenched fist, then she looked at him anxiously. He smiled at her and put his hand over her clenched and angry one. Wonderingly she looked down at his hand on hers as both rested on the shapeless clay; gradually a faint smile softened the anxious hopelessness that had shown on her face for so many months. Reassured they returned to their work and the artist said, "You see, Jane, I like you and believe in you, so you don't need to worry when things don't go right."

It was then that she spoke for the first time in months. Searching his face, she said wonderingly, "You like me?"

From then on her progress was rapid and she was able to talk with the doctors and was one day released.

She had reached out to touch someone and had not been repelled and had been touched in return.

Ask yourself this week, "Who's touching you, and who needs to be touched in return by you." Miracles can happen!