Sunday April 27, 1980

"THE POWER OF SUGGESTION" Mark 5:24-34

The woman said to herself, "If I touch even his garments, I shall be made well." And so she reached out and touched his garments, and immediately the hemorrhage ceased; and she felt in her body that she had been healed of her disease.

The Gospel of Mark tells us that this woman had had the hemorrhage problem for twelve years and that she had suffered much under many physicians and had spent all that she had during those years and was no better, but rather the condition had gotten worse.

But now this woman believed that the power of God present in Jesus Christ could heal her disease. She imagined to herself--if I only touch his garments, I will be made well. Perhaps that's what made the difference. During all those twelve previous years, she had not found a physician she believed in, or one who took her seriously. Now she had found the great physician. Thus Jesus told her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well."

A miracle? Yes! And yet at the same time a most natural event. Healing is built into us. We are so made that we are supposed to get well. God works in many ways to heal us and change us, and one of these is through the power of suggestion which is actually a form of prayer.

Although the power of suggestion often comes to us from others, it's also a power we can use ourselves.

A young man who was learning meditation and hypnosis was called into the military during the Viet Nam War. He was injured in combat and found himself alone with a severed artery; he was unable to move or to do anything about it. He remembered his course in meditation and hypnosis and realized that if he ever needed something urgently, he needed it now. So he employed the self-hypnotic techniques he'd learned, exercising his mental control to clamp down on the artery and stop the spurting of blood. This is normally unheard of; external pressure and immediate medical attention are considered indispensable for a severed artery. Hence the astonishment of the medic when

he arrived to find the soldier comfortable, relaxed, and out of danger. From one perspective it was a miracle; from another it was a most natural event.

There have been other stories like this of superhuman feats that have occurred when the necessity was there. Most of us have heard about the woman who lifted up a car to save her child from being crushed, or the man who stayed alive in an airtight bank vault by meditating and thereby slowing his respiration.

We've also known for a long time that some sick people can harness a tremendous amoung of energy to get better, and that others, less ill, get worse and die.

The power of suggestion can and does play an important part in our lives. In a delightful and penetrating essay, Dr. Lewis Thomas writes about the power of suggestion in dealing with warts.

Here's a little bit of what he has to say. "Warts are wonderful structures. They can appear overnight on any part of the skin, like mushrooms on a damp lawn, full grown and splendid in the complexity of their architecture. Viewed in stained sections under a microscope, they are the most specialized of cellular arrangements, constructed as though for a purpose. They sit there like turreted mounds of dense, impenetrable horn, impregnable, designed for defense against the world outside."

But then Dr. Thomas goes on to observe, "The strangest thing about warts is that they tend to go away. And they can be made to go away by something that can only be called thinking or something like thinking. It is one of the great mystifications of science: warts can be ordered off the skin by hypnotic suggestion."

"Not everyone believes this, but the evidence goes back a long way and is persuasive. Generations of internists and dermatologists, and their grandmothers for that matter, have been convinced of the phenomenon." One wise medical doctor told Dr. Thomas that, "it was his practice to paint gentian violet over a wart and then assure the patient firmly that it would be gone in a week, and he never saw it fail.

There have been several meticulous studies by good clinical investigators, with proper controls. In one of these, fourteen patients with seemingly intractable generalized warts on both sides of the body were hypnotized, and the suggestion was made that all the warts on one side of the body would begin to go away. Within several weeks, the results were indisputably positive; in nine patients, all or nearly all of the warts on the suggested side had vanished, while the control side had just as many as ever.

It is interesting that most of the warts vanished precisely as they were instructed, but it is even more interesting that mistakes were made. Just as you might expect as in other affairs requiring a clear understanding of which is the right side and which is the left side, one of the subjects got mixed up and destroyed the warts on the wrong side.

Dr. Thomas comments in his essay, "If my unconscious can figure out how to manipulate the mechanisms for getting rid of certain warts and for deploying all the various cells in the correct order for tissue rejection with the power of suggestion, then all I have to say is that my unconscious is a bit further along than I am. I wish I had a wart right now just to see if I am that talented."

Dr. Thomas goes on to observe, "Any mental apparatus that can reject a wart is something else again. This is not the sort of confused, disordered process you'd expect at the hands of the kind of unconscious you read about in books, out on the edge of things making up dreams or getting mixed up on words or having hysterics. Whatever or whoever is responsible for this has the accuracy and precision of a surgeon. There almost has to be a Person in charge, running matters of meticulous detail beyond anyone's comprehension."

Perhaps that's enough about warts, but their being made to disappear by suggestion does underscore the power of suggestion that can and does work in all of us.

Sometimes we consciously use the power of suggestion and sometimes it operates without our being aware of it. Sometimes the power of suggestion can be helpful to us and at other times it can cause us problems.

What exactly is suggestion? It is a message from some external or internal source indicating what one should do or how things should be, what is right and what is wrong. It is a message which helps condition us.

For example, in a typical TV auto commercial, hundreds of hours of research and many thousands of dollars go into the nuances of suggestion. Just the right person with just the right clothes, expression, gestures, words and intonation reaches into our minds at levels of which we are not even aware. The technique of repetition is liberally employed, to say the least. You may think you're buying a car, but you may actually end up purchasing a sex object.

The same sort of research goes into the packaging of supermarket food. The very atmosphere in a supermarket is conducive to hypnosis, the endless rows of pretty packages, the soft, innocuous music. Without realizing it, you are enticed by a well-calculated color on a package, but a picture or a set of words. The label may carry the suggestion that the product is nutritious and healthful (a leading breakfast cereal with a very nutritious-sounding name is 50% sugar). When we decide to buy something our decision may have very little to do with our true wants and needs.

Religions have traditionally employed the power of suggestion to influence lives, sometimes in a positive fashion and sometimes in a negative way. So the first point to remember is that the power of suggestion is always at work, sometimes consciously and sometimes we are not aware of it, and we can let it affect us for good or it can lead us astray.

Take a simple example of how suggestion may operate to make a person ill. A man with an ulcer visits a doctor. Superficial questioning indicates that his life is going quite well; he is even expecting a promotion soon, and his family is very pleased about this. The doctor, suspecting stress behind the ulcer, hypnotizes the patient. He suggests to the patient that he focus on the present moment to get in touch with his actual feelings. The patient, finds to his own surprise that he is very nervous about the promotion, actually afraid of it and resisting it. But the suggestion coming from society and from

his family has been that promotion is highly desirable, something to feel only glad about. The suggestion has implanted in the man the ambition for getting ahead as a value, as something that should be. And this value has made it difficult for him to see his true feeling, a feeling which he thinks he shouldn't have. He is torn, but doesn't know why, and this tension expresses itself in his stomach, bringing illness. If when there is conflict between our values and the way we actually feel, stress is the inevitable result.

Furthermore, much of our stress comes not only from the suggestions of others, but from unconscious suggestions we give ourselves. Conscious self-suggestion rightly put to use can be of great value, as we'll see in a moment, but some of our unconscious suggestions to ourselves can play havoc in our lives. It is therefore very important that we learn to become conscious of our self-suggestions as well as all suggestions.

For some unknown reason, most of the unconscious suggestions we give ourselves have a negative element to them, but they can be changed. We've all observed people who decide in advance that they are going to have an unpleasant time at a future gathering. When the time comes, their self-programming succeeds and they are miserable. Or we may imagine ourselves being clumsy and inadequate in a new and unfamiliar situation. This too tends to fulfill itself. Why not imagine just the opposite in each case?

An overweight person on a strict diet imagines himself going out to a special occasion dinner with friends and succumbing to the rich and plentiful food. When the time comes, he finds himself overwhelmed by desire and indulges. Many of our cravings arise in just this fashion. We suggest to ourselves in advance through imagination and visualization that we will want something or act in a certain way and sure enough it happens as readily as if we'd been hypnotized into being that way. In point of fact, we have been hypnotized by our own power of suggestion.

It has been said that what exists inside is what comes to exist outside. Jesus Christ pointed this out in another way. He said, "The good person out of good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of evil treasure brings forth evil." And in another place he said, "It is not what goes into a person that defiles a person, but what comes

out that defiles a person." People who go around always consumed with unhappy thoughts and negative visual images tend to have their pictures and thoughts eventually verified by the external world. Unpleasant thoughts tend to attract unpleasant events.

But this also means, like the woman who reached out to touch the garments of Jesus, that we can use the power of suggestion and the power of mental visualization for positive results. It can be a tremendous aid in creating new patterns of behaviour for us as well as in helping us become new persons. The power of suggestion can work as a healing force. People have aided the shrinking and disappearance of tumors by visualizing blood cells of their immune systems going in and gobbling up the tumor. There have been people with diabetes who were told to visualize the pancreas working more effectively, secreting more insulin. It often worked for them if they were able to visualize it, see it in their imagination. There have been alcoholics who were trained in this technique and told to visualize themselves not taking that first drink, whether things were going well or going badly. And the ones who could do this had a high state of sobriety.

From a Christian point of view, the right kind of suggestion and visualization is a form of prayer in the best sense of the word. God's power can and does work through our positive visual images and through the power of suggestion.

God wills life and health for all people. The power of suggestion can add to our inner healing and the more we are healed inwardly, the better we are outwardly. Amen.