Sunday, March 10, 1985
THE WOMAN WITH THE TIMID TOUCH
Mark 5:25-34

She was a shy withdrawn individual, afraid she would be noticed, and ashamed of her condition. She had few friends and spent most of her time alone and in hiding. For twelve years now she had been afflicted with a condition which the people of her time considered unclean, and she was considered by men as untouchable. The problem was an almost continual hemorrhage.

She had spent almost all of her money trying various cures and had seen every physician she could find — but her condition grew worse instead of better. Life hardly seemed worth living anymore. There was no one she could even talk with about her condition. Maybe, she thought to herself, I am uncurable and will have to endure a lifetime of suffering. It certainly didn´t seem fair to her.

Worse still, she was feeling more and more rejected and depressed. Her sense of self-worth was almost depleted. She was certain no one was interested in her as a person or would pay any attention to her. If someone would just treat her as human being, instead of a person with a problem. She had tried repeatedly to make friends, but her shyness kept her from reaching out very much.

Then one day, she heard the rumors that a new teacher and healer was going to be in the area where she lived. The least she could do, she decided, would be to stand at the edge of the crowd where she wouldn´t be noticed and maybe she could get a look at this person. She certainly had tried everything else.

The crowd that day was larger than she expected. People were everywhere. Certainly, there was something different about this man. Pitting her shyness aside, she decided that she had to get closer. So she began to slowly work her way through the crowd. All around her were people from every walk of life — many of them more important than she was, as the world evaluates people.

Yet the closer she got to Jesus, the more she was sure that here was someone who could be of help to her in ways that no one else could. Perhaps if she could touch him, that would be enough. So timidly, and with both fear and faith, she got as close to him as she could, stretched her hand through the crowd and touched him. It was as if she had touched God!

Then the unexpected happened, not only did she feel within herself that she had been healed, but Jesus turned and looked around him and asked, “Who touched me?” It seemed a foolish question considering the circumstances, and the disciples said just that. “You see the crowd pressing around you and yet you ask, “Who touched me.” but Jesus was not thinking of the swarms of people crowding in on him. He had felt a different kind of touch, the touch of someone seeking help, seeking recognition, seeking acceptance, yet too timid to ask for help with words. Someone had deliberately touched him.

As Jesus searched the people around him, his eyes came upon a woman who then knelt at his feet with both terror and joy spread across her face. Something tremendous had just happened to her. She had been healed, but she had also now been noticed and singled out. Jesus then told her that her faith had made her well, that God loved her and to go in peace.

Her life was changed forever.

Again, as in other stories like this one, the gospel writers give us a highly condensed account of what happened. I´m sure that the woman and Jesus had more of a conversation than what is recorded. So, we must let our imaginations fill in the empty spaces.

Like all the people who met Jesus along the way, this woman has universal timeless quality. She mirrors human nature and her condition before and after she met Jesus and how she changed has a lot say to us today.

Note first her long and seemingly incurable illness. It´s a depressing thing to have a condition which never seems to improve and for which there seems no cure. It´s even more despairing to have a condition which society thinks of as being unclean or which society thinks of a being unclear or which makes one untouchable. In Jesus´ time, women with hemorrhages were considered untouchable. Even if one can hide the condition from others, it robs one of self-worth.

And then if one tries cure after cure, test after test, treatment after treatment, but gets no better, hope diminishes to zero. In the process one feels less than a person, and more like and object to being experimented on.

In his book, “I know you hurt, but there´s nothing to bandage,” Dr. Donald Fisher tells the story of a woman who suffered for a long time with a severe pain in the lower right portion of her abdomen. After five hospitalizations, 5 anesthetics and 5 surgical procedures, plus numerous other tests including X-rays, upper and lower GI´s and numerous blood studies, the pain remained.

When she became his patient, Dr. Fisher asked her when she had last been well, and she said, “Two years ago.” “When did you get sick?” he said. “One year ago, this month,” she replied. The doctor asked her what she had been doing when she wasn´t being examined or operated on. “Not much,” she said, “Just driving up to see my mother in the hospital in Washington. I was one of her favorites.”
The doctor asked her, “What´s wrong with your mother?” and she said, “It´s sad. She´s been dying with cancer of the colon very slowly during the entire last year.” The doctor asked her where it started, and she pointed to her own painful area. The doctor then asked if any of the other doctors were aware of this. And she said, “No, why should they be? It just never came up and what does it have to do with it anyway?”

Then they discussed the emotional impact of watching her mother hie with so much pain and the stress it could place on her, the daughter. After more discussions and some tranquilizers for two weeks, the pain gradually went away.

Many of us need more than physical healing like this woman and the one in the gospel story, we need to be re-connected to God and to others!

Note secondly, the timidness of the woman in the gospel story and this timidity was no doubt related to her long illness. She had a low sense of self-worth. In shyly reaching out to touch Jesus so that no one would notice her, she represents those among us who want help, yet are afraid to ask in conventional ways, but are nonetheless, still reaching out to touch someone, reach out very much.

This woman was so afraid of human contact that if someone had said to her, “Of course, Jesus could help you. Come along with me. I´ll introduce you to him,” she would´ve run away in the opposite direction. “Why would Jesus want to help her? She wasn´t even worth noticing by him or anyone else,” at least that´s the way she felt most of the time deep within herself.

But still she reached out to touch him. Also, deep down within her, she had a tiny glimmer of faith and hope which told her that if she could only touch him, or even the hem of his robe, she would be helped in some way. She was reaching out for relationships, for acceptance and all of this is a part of healing. She needed to be brought out of her isolation.

There are people today all around us and around the edges of the church who are times and afraid, who feel unworthy, yet who are hesitantly reaching out to us and to God, but not in ways that are always straightforward. Sometimes it takes incredible sensitivity such as Jesus had to notice their effort. And sometimes too, such individuals cannot be hurried. They have to reach out in their own way and in their own time.

In the first parish I served, I began one day finding notes written to me and left in places where I would find them. The notes were never signed, but the individual writing them poured her heart out in them. She wrote of her feelings of low self-esteem; she confessed her sins — and in each note contained instructions as to where I was to leave on this clandestine correspondence. Each time I answered her notes, I did my best to assure her that God loves her and had already forgiven her. Finally, the notes stopped coming. It was only several years later that the writer finally identified herself to me and told me in person how much that correspondence had meant to her.
But she was so timid in her approach that it took her a long time to finally come out of herself.

Sometimes too, unlike Jesus, we miss the timid touches of those around us who are seeking acceptance and help ion their problems and pain. The signals they give are not always straightforward, but they are still speaking to us in their own timid way. “I need help,” or “Be my friend,” or “I need help,” or talk to,” or “I´m lonely,” or “Pay attention to me,” or “I´m afraid,” or “I need your forgiveness.”

This story from Mark´s gospel is about a woman with the timid touch, but it´s probably more about men than it is women, because we men have more difficulty in admitting our need for help or admitting that we have problems of any kind.

But note in the third place that Jesus accepted the women no matter now timid or secretive her approach. And this is the main point of the story and why it was remembered by the early church.

The story reminds us that the love of God is such that even the timidest reaching out on our part is recognized and acknowledged. We don´t have to get God´s attention. We have God´s attention all the time our timid touch is Marely the beginning of our being opens to receiving and accepting God´s love and forgiveness which is always ready and waiting.

No matter how unworthy and how untouchable we feel, God´s love is ready and waiting for us. In the story from Mark´s gospel, Jesus was not too busy, despite the crowd pressing in upon him and despite the fact that he was on the way to someone´s house to help them he was not too busy or preoccupied to stop and recognize and accept the woman who had timidly reached out to touch him. From a nobody, she became somebody.

In his book, “The Creative Years,” Reuel Howe tells the story of a young woman named Jane Foster who, on the eve of her marriage had collapsed and the wedding had to be postponed indefinitely. As the days passed, her condition grew worse, and she went into such a deep depression she had to be put in a mental hospital. She continued to deteriorate until she could 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 try to be of help and he was given permission to try. When he entered her room for the first time, 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, 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 left.

Permission was granted for him to see Jane again and each time he 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 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. 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 she did not speak or 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 her ass 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 not long after was released. It had taken her a long time even to timidly reach out to touch someone, she had not been rejected and had been touched in return.

So it is that this story from Mark´s gospel speaks to all of us — it says to those who are waiting to be loved and accepted reach out to touch God. You will be accepted, forgiven and loved no matter how unworthy you feel or how timid your touch. And the story also says, ask yourself this week. Who´s reaching out to touch you? And does it need to be touched in return? Miracles can happen. Amen.