Sunday, June 9, 1996
WHO TOUCHED ME?
Matthew 9:9-13,18-26

She was a shy, withdrawn individual, afraid of being noticed and ashamed of her condition. She had few friends and spent most of her time alone and in hiding. For twelve years, she had been afflicted with a condition that the people of her time considered unclean, and as a result, she was deemed untouchable. The medical problem was an almost continual hemorrhage.

She had spent nearly all her money trying various cures and had consulted every available physician, but her condition grew worse instead of better. Life hardly seemed worth living anymore. There was no one she could talk to about her condition. Maybe, she thought, she was incurable and would have to endure a lifetime of suffering. Or worse still, perhaps God was punishing her for some unknown sin.

Her sense of self-worth was nearly depleted. She was convinced that no one cared about her condition, that no one would pay attention to her. If only someone would treat her as a human being instead of as a problem. She had tried repeatedly to make friends, but her shyness kept her from reaching out very much.

Then one day, she heard rumors about a new teacher and healer coming to her area. She decided the least she could do was stand at the edge of the crowd where she wouldn't be noticed, maybe catch a glimpse of this person, or perhaps even get close enough to touch him. After all, she had tried everything else.

The crowd that day was larger than expected, and people were everywhere. Certainly, there was something different about this man. Pushing her shyness aside, she decided she had to get closer. Slowly, she began to work her way through the crowd. All around her were people from every walk of life — many of them, by the world's standards, more important than she was.

But the closer she got to Jesus, the more she felt certain that this man could help her in ways no one else could. If only she could touch him, she thought, that would be enough. So timidly, with both fear and faith, she stretched out her hand through the crowd and touched him. It was as if she had touched God. Immediately, she knew she was different.

This story is found in three of the four gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Both Mark and Luke add a detail that Matthew omits: Jesus was aware that someone had touched him. It was as if he felt energy flowing from him to the person who had intentionally touched him. So he turned and asked, "Who touched me?"

To the disciples, this seemed like a foolish question. They said, "You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you ask, 'Who touched me?'" But Jesus wasn't thinking of the swarms of people. He had felt a different kind of touch — the touch of someone seeking help, seeking recognition and acceptance, someone desperately needing healing but too shy to ask with words. Someone had deliberately touched him.

As Jesus looked around, his eyes fell on a woman. She knew that he knew, and so she quickly knelt at his feet, with both terror and joy on her face. Jesus smiled, took her hand, and told her that her faith had made her well, that God loved her, and to go in peace.

As with other stories of people who encountered Jesus and whose lives were changed, this story has a universal, timeless quality. It reveals not only our relationship with God but also has much to say about how we relate to one another.

First, note the woman's timidity. Her long illness likely contributed to her shyness. It's depressing to have a condition that never seems to improve, especially one that society views as unclean or untouchable, as was the case with women suffering from continuous hemorrhages in that culture. Even if she could hide her condition from others, it would erode her sense of self-worth.

After submitting to test after test, trying one medicine after another, and receiving treatment after treatment without any improvement, hope dwindles to nothing. You begin to feel less like a person and more like an object to be experimented on.

In her timidity, as she reached out to touch Jesus so that no one would notice her, she represents those among us who want help but are afraid to ask in conventional ways. Yet, they still reach out, seeking connection, seeking to be touched by someone and to touch someone in return.

This woman was so afraid of human contact, so afraid of being rejected again, that if someone had said, "I know someone who can help you. Come with me, and I'll introduce you," she would have run in the opposite direction. Why would anyone want to help her?

But still, she reached out to touch him. Deep down, she had a glimmer of faith and hope that told her if she could just touch Jesus, or even the hem of his clothing, she would be helped in some way.

There are people today all around us, on the edges of our communities and churches, who are timid and afraid, who feel unworthy, yet who are hesitantly reaching out — not in straightforward ways, but still reaching. It takes incredible sensitivity, like Jesus had, to notice their effort. And sometimes, these individuals cannot be hurried. They need to reach out in their own way, in their own time.

In the first parish I served, I began finding anonymous notes left for me in various places. The writer, who never signed the notes, poured out her heart, confessing her sins and repeatedly asking if God loved her and had truly forgiven her. She instructed me where to leave my written responses, and for months, we carried on this clandestine correspondence. Each time I answered her notes, I assured her that God loved her and had already forgiven her. Finally, the notes stopped coming. About a year later, the writer identified herself to me and told me how much that correspondence had meant to her. She had been too ashamed to come forward, and it had taken her a long time to begin coming out of herself.

This story illustrates the power of human touch, one way we express our connectedness to each other and to God. We are rediscovering the importance of human touch. We can touch each other with kind words, through prayer, with a hug, or simply by holding someone's hand.

The Bible is filled with stories of healings through the "laying on of hands." There are nurses today who have adapted the religious tradition of laying on hands in a field called "therapeutic touch."

In his book Timeless Healing, Dr. Herbert Benson reports on such endeavors. According to research, therapeutic touch has been found to significantly decrease postoperative pain, reduce the need for medication, and even improve wound-healing rates. Patients treated with this therapy also experienced significant reductions in anxiety.

Dr. Benson also says that many of his patients have remarked on the comfort they felt when a surgeon or anesthesiologist held their hand as they were being put under anesthesia. From my own experience, during a surgical procedure I underwent, a nurse lovingly held my hand and quietly talked to me throughout. It was one of the most comforting experiences of my life. For months afterward, I could still feel the healing touch of her hands.

We know that babies who are deprived of physical affection in their first few months suffer long-term consequences from the lack of touch.

In one remarkable story, a three-year-old boy named Michael began singing to his unborn sister every night. When the baby was born, complications during delivery left her in critical condition. The doctors had little hope for her survival. But Michael kept asking to sing to his sister. Finally, they dressed him in scrubs and took him into the NICU, where he sang to her, “You are my sunshine, my only sunshine…” The next day, instead of planning a funeral, they took her home. She had responded to the loving touch of her brother’s voice.

Dr. M. Scott Peck, in his book Further Along the Road Less Traveled, tells of a Christian professionals’ conference where Dr. Harvey Cox spoke about this very story — the woman who had been hemorrhaging for years and touched Jesus. After telling the story, Cox asked the audience which character they identified with most. A hundred raised their hands for the bleeding woman. Many identified with the anxious father of the dying daughter. Most identified with the crowd. But only six identified with Jesus.

Something is wrong here. Out of 600 Christian leaders, only six identified with Jesus. But identifying with Jesus is exactly what we are called to do. God wants to work through people like you and me, just as God worked through Jesus. God’s healing power often flows through our caring touches. There are timid people everywhere, waiting for each of us to reach out and touch them. In doing so, both they and we experience the healing touch of God. Amen.