Book 32

Sunday June 9, 1996

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

She was a shy withdrawn individual, afraid she would be noticed and ashamed of her condition.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 to be untouchable. The medical problem was an almost continual hemmorhage.

She had spent almost all of her money trying various cures and she had consulted every physician available--but her condition grew worse instead of better. Life hardly seemed worth living anymore. There was no one she could talk with about her condition. Maybe, she thought to

herself, I am incurable and will have to endure a lifetime of suffering. Or worse still, perhaps God was punishing her for some sin of which she was unaware.

She was becoming more and more depressed. Her sense of self- worth was almost depleted. She was convinced that no one was interested in her condition, that no one would pay attention to her. If someone would only treat her as a human being, instead of as 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, or perhaps she could even get close enough to touch him. She certainly had tried everything else.

The crowd that day was larger than expected. People were everywhere. Certainly there was something different about this man. Putting her shyness aside, she decided 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. If

only 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 out her hand through the crowd and touched him. It was if she had touched God. She knew immediately after touching him that she was a different woman.

This story is found in three of the four gospels---Matthew, Mark and Luke. Both Mark and Luke add a detail that is not included in Matthew's version. Mark and Luke report that Jesus was aware that someone had touched him. It was as if he felt an energy flowing from him to the person who had intentionally touched him. So he turned and looked around and asked, "Who touched me?"

To the disciples it seemed a foolish question considering the circumstances and they said 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, acceptance, someone who desperately needed healing, yet too shy to ask for with words. Someone had deliberately touched him.

As Jesus looked at the people around him, his eyes came upon a woman and she knew that he knew so she quickly then knelt at his feet with both terror and joy spread across 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 the stories of other people who came into contact with Jesus and whose lives were changed, this story of this woman has a universal timeless quality. It reveals not only our relationship to God but has a lot to say about how we are to relate to each other.

Note first, the timidness of this woman. Undoubtedly this timidity was related to her long illness. It's a depressing situation to have a condition which never seems to improve and for which there seems to be no cure. It's even more despairing to have an illness which society thinks of as being unclean or which makes one untouchable, an outcast. In the culture of that time, women with continual hemorrhages were thought to be in that category. Even if it's possible to hide the malady from others, it can take away from

one's self-worth.

Then if you submit to test after test, try one medicine after another, treatment after treatment, but you make no improvement, hope diminishes to zero. In the process you can feel less like a person and more like an object to be experimented on.

In her timidly as she reached 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 reaching out to touch someone and to have someone touch them in return.

This woman was so afraid of human contact, so afraid of being rejected one more time, that if

someone had said to her, "I know someone who can help you. Come with me and I'll introduce you to him," she would've run away in the opposite direction. Why would anyone want to help her?

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

There are people today all around us and around the edges of the church who are timid and afraid, who feel unworthy, yet who are hesitantly reaching out to us and to God, but not in ways that are straight-forward. 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 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 out her heart in them. She wrote of her lack of self-worth. She confessed her sins--and in each note she kept asking if God loved her and had truly forgiven her. Each note also contained instructions as to where I was to leave a written answer. For months we carried on this clandestine correspondence. Each time I answered her notes, I did my best to assure her that God loved her and had already forgiven her. Finally the notes stopped coming. About a year later, the writer of the

notes finally got up the courage to identify herself to me and she told me how much that correspondence had meant to her. She had been too ashamed so that it took her a long time to begin to come out of herself.

This story is about the power of human touch which is one way of expressing our connectedness to each other and to God. Once again we are rediscovering how important human touch is. We can touch each other with kind words written or spoken, with intercessory prayer, with hugs, and with the simple act of holding someone's hand.

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

"therapeutic touch."

In his new book, TIMELESS HEALING, Dr. Herbert Benson reports on some of these endeavors. According to research reported by Dr. Benson, the use of therapeutic touch has been found to significantly decrease postoperative pain, to decrease patients' need for analgesia, and in one study, to decrease headache pain in 90 percent of patients with tension headaches. The research also reported that wound-healing rates were significantly improved when therapeutic touch was used, and other investigators demonstrated that hospitalized patients treated with the therapy experienced a significant reduction in anxiety.

Dr. Benson says that in the experience of his own medical practice he's often heard patients remark

about how much it meant to them that a surgeon or anesthesiologist held their hand when they were losing consciousness with anesthesia. From my personal experience I know that with one surgical procedure I had under a local anesthetic, a nurse lovingly held my hands during the surgery and in a quiet voice reported to me the progress of the operation. It was the most comforting experiences I've ever had. For months afterward I could feel the healing touch of her hands on mine.

We also know that babies who are denied holding and affection in their formative first months suffer long-term affects of this deprivation of touch.

Dr. Benson believes that science will continue to

find inherent healing value in human touch and especially in such therapies as massage.

In doing my research for this sermon, one of the most fascinating stories I discovered was this one.

When Karen was pregnant with her second child, a seemingly normal pregnancy, her 3 year old son Michael began a relationship with his unborn sister by singing to her every night. Night after night he would sing to his new sister the same song.

When it became time for Karen to give birth to the baby, there was trouble during the delivery. Michael's baby sister was in serious condition by the time she was finally born. The infant was

immediately rushed to the Neonatal Intensive Care unit at St. Mary's Hospital in Knoxville, Tennessee. As the days passed, the infant grew weaker. The pediatric specialist told the family that chances for her survival were almost nonexistent and he tried to prepare them for her expected death.

During the stay in the intensive care unit, Michael asked continually about seeing his baby sister. He wanted to "sing" to her. At the beginning of the second week, they dressed Michael in an oversized scrub suit and took him into the unit to see his sister. Michael was asked to leave. His mom protested however and said, "He is not leaving until he sings to his little sister. He began to sing this song.

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy when skies are gray. You'll never know dear how much I love you, please don't take my sunshine away."

Woman's Day magazine called it the "miracle of a brother's song." The doctors called it a miracle. Karen called it a miracle of God's love. The next day when they thought they might be planning a funeral, they took Michael's sister home. She had responded to the loving touch of her brother's voice.

Dr. M. Scott Peck in his new book, FURTHER ALONG THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED, tells about a conference of Christian professionals at which he and Dr. Harvey Cox, a theologian, were speakers.

Harvey Cox told the story of the woman who had been hemorrhaging for years and who touched Jesus. Remember in this story, Jesus was on the way to visit the dying daughter of a Roman soldier and he was delayed because he took time to be with the woman who touched him.

After telling the story, Cox asked the audience of 600 Christian professionals whom they identified with in the story. When he asked who identified with the bleeding woman, about a hundred raised their hands. When he asked who identified with the anxious Roman father, more of the rest raised their hands. When he asked who identified with the crowd, most raised their hands. But when he asked who identified with Jesus, only six people raised their hands.

Something is wrong here. Of the 600 or more professional Christian leaders, only one out of a hundred identified with Jesus. Maybe more actually did but were afraid to raise their hands lest that seem arrogant.

Yet something is wrong with our concept of Christianity if it seems arrogant to identify with Jesus. That's exactly what we are supposed to do. God wants to work through people like you and me in the same way as God worked through Jesus. God's healing power is frequently transmitted through our caring touches. There are timid people everywhere waiting to be touched by each one of us, and in so doing they and we can come to experience the healing touch of God. Amen.