

Words and Touches – Georgann Kurtz-Shaw

2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45

About three weeks ago on the last day of our January interterm trip in Israel, Richard Huston took some of us who hadn't been there yet to visit the Garden Tomb. We had already visited the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, but some scholars believe that the Garden Tomb site just outside the walls of the Old City is more likely the place where Jesus' burial and resurrection occurred. As we stood outside the entrance getting ready to go in, a towering Nigerian man approached us to find out where we were from. We told him we were from the United States, and his face lit up. I can't remember the exact order of conversation, but somewhere early on he asked, "Do you know Benny Hinn?" Richard very graciously said "yes," and the man asked how Benny was doing. Then the man enthusiastically asked the same question about several other popular tele-evangelists—Kenneth Copeland, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, John Hagee, Jimmy Swaggart, and Oral Roberts' son. "Are they still active," he asked. He also inquired about Billy Graham's health and Franklin Graham. (As this conversation continued, I was very thankful he was asking Richard these questions rather than me because besides the Grahams, Roberts, Swaggart, and Robertson, I hadn't heard of most of the people he mentioned. My literacy skills fail when it comes to tele-evangelists.)

What intrigued me most about this conversation was that because he thought we were American Christians he quickly associated us with these evangelists. I found that funny at the time, but also a little disconcerting. I'm guessing the primary reason I don't know the names of these T.V. evangelists is that I made an unconscious, or perhaps conscious, choice at some point in my life to disassociate myself and my faith from them or people like them. They rub my theology the wrong way. Honestly, they make my skin prickle. (However, as I was preparing this sermon, I did discover that there are some really entertaining but somewhat blasphemous YouTube videos of a few of them. So I'm thinking about improving my literacy over spring break. You've probably already seen all these videos, so feel free to recommend the ones you like best.)

But why did this man from another continent and hemisphere first associate us with American T.V. evangelists? And why do many of these evangelists have active T.V. presences so that they are known so well by a pastor in Nigeria? I hope it's primarily because people are meeting God through them, perhaps those who can't or won't be in church today. But I'm guessing it's also because humans are fascinated by the spectacle, especially by the dramatic healings that are the trademarks of some of these ministries. Humans are drawn to the miraculous. If you think about it for a moment, we all need and want to be healed. In our lectionary readings for today, we see that this is clearly not a new yearning.

Today's scriptures provide us with a framed story, with "healing" bookends. We begin and end with familiar miraculous healings of "lepers"—Naaman in our Old Testament passage and a man with leprosy in the Gospel lesson. You probably know the II Kings story of Naaman's healing. If we can step back from our predilection for spectacle a moment, what I would like to focus on in this story is not the fact that Naaman was healed of his skin disease—that when he went into the Jordan River he was considered a "leper" and when he came out "his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean." Instead I would like to draw your attention to the fact that Naaman's healing came about through the words of his servants. Naaman was from Aram, a warring nation with Israel located across the Jordan River and to the north in the area that is today Syria. Naaman was an admired military commander in Aram—a favorite of his king and his people—mostly it seems because he had great success on the battlefield. Some of Naaman's successes had apparently been against Israel because as the text tells us, a young Israelite girl who was captured in one of Aram's raids served Naaman's wife. Ironically it was this young servant girl who suggested that Naaman could find healing if he went to the "prophet in Samaria." She had apparently seen or at least heard talk about Elisha and the healings he had performed. In Aram this servant girl is completely powerless (she is a prisoner), yet she speaks the words that begin Naaman's path to healing.

As the story progresses we see that Naaman was repeatedly steered away from true healing by kings and by his own arrogance and pride. When Naaman was about to go back to Aram because Elisha sent a servant to speak to him and further offended him by not offering the kind of healing Naaman expected, it was Naaman's male servants who convinced him to try the remedy Elisha suggested, and he was healed when he washed himself in the Jordan River seven times. He was baptized, seven times. By the words of the weak, Naaman was led to God's healing grace, not by his own position of power or by the conventional power of the kings of Aram and Israel.

Through these servants, both Israelite and Aramean, the God of Israel crossed the boundaries of nations to cleanse the body, and as we see a few verses later, the heart of this foreigner Naaman as well. A big part of the Godly Play approach that we use in Sunday School with our young children each week is the "wondering" response time after our Bible story. So here are my wondering statements about Naaman's experience, Godly Play style. I wonder how Naaman felt. I wonder if Naaman would have remained a leper if he hadn't listened to his servants. I wonder if Naaman treated his servants differently after this experience. I wonder who we are more like—Naaman or these servants.

In chapel at the college this week, recent Greenville College grads Courtney and Greg Coates challenged us to abandon our typical American responses to problem solving and our need for quick solutions. We want and usually do get things quickly, even if we don't have the money to buy them. We want to solve ours and the world's problems quickly. We want to be healed and to heal the world quickly. We want to send money to the horn of Africa and see suffering end there immediately. We want to put Palestinians and Israelis in a room together and have them emerge a few hours later with a tidy two-state solution to their conflicts that both sides celebrate.

And this week, today even, we want Israel and the U.S. to feel comfortable with how Iran is handling their nuclear capabilities so that yet another U.S. military action isn't begun in the Middle East. T.V. evangelists often offer a quick fix to our problems as well. If I send in a donation, I can have my name added to a prayer chain or embroidered on a quilt that millions can later purchase as Christmas presents for their grandmothers. I think we as a nation would mass produce miracles on an assembly line if we could. Fortunately for us though, God doesn't always do things quickly and rarely does things the way we expect.

At the other end of our lectionary readings from Naaman, we watch as Jesus heals a man with a skin disease. This story is the last in a series of short vignettes in Galilee that Mark used early in his gospel to establish Jesus' identity as teacher, preacher, exorcist, and healer. This is actually the third healing story in the first 45 verses of Mark's gospel; we've heard the previous two our last two Sundays. Unlike Elisha who chose to send his servant with instructions for healing to Naaman rather than minister directly to an enemy of Israel, at the end of Mark chapter one, Jesus himself delivered the message of healing to the "leper." In doing this he both himself broke and sanctioned the leper's breaking of well-known Jewish Levitical laws that were incredibly specific about where "lepers" could be, what they could do, and how they could be treated. The "leper" came to Jesus even though he was forbidden to approach him. There is disagreement among scholars over how Jesus responded to the man. In the New Revised Standard Version that we have in front of us, the text says that Jesus was "moved with pity." That response seems typical of what I expect of Jesus and of myself. But other scholars suggest that a more accurate rendering of Mark's version of this story would be that Jesus was "moved with anger." You, like me, might even have a footnote in your Bible at home explaining that "some ancient authorities" read the word "anger" instead of the word "pity" here. Since there's no definitive way of knowing what Mark intended over two thousand years ago, I decided I prefer the word "anger"—today at least. It makes sense to me that Jesus was bothered by this leper who interrupted his ministry, broke Jewish law by approaching him, and wanted Jesus to break the law regarding healing. Or perhaps Jesus might have been "angered" as well by the laws that ostracized this man from his community, from his family, and from all human touch. As a well-educated Jew, Jesus knew these laws well, so when he chose not only to heal the man but to touch the man to complete the act of healing, he understood that he crossed these boundaries himself. He became an angry law-breaker, and he made himself unclean. Jesus did this because he understood that what this man needed wasn't just clean skin; he needed to be touched. I wonder how it felt to be touched after being untouchable for a very long time.

Following the healing, even though Jesus instructed the man to protect his "Messianic Secret" and to report immediately to the priest, the man did just the opposite. He became an evangelist, spreading the story of Jesus' touch to those he met. Perhaps he even composed a psalm rejoicing over his healing like Psalm 30 that we read aloud together today. The man also didn't follow Jesus' directive to observe Jewish law by going to the priest so that he could officially be declared clean and could make his required offering at the temple. Because this man ignored Jesus' instructions, Jesus and his new ministry suffered. He was unable to continue his work openly in the cities but had to stay in the country for a while, assuming the leper's place as the

ostracized and unclean one. I wonder if Jesus had conflicting feelings of joy and frustration after he healed the man.

Jewish society provided clear lines of demarcation between clean and unclean, holy and unholy, sacred and profane. Including this healing fairly early in Jesus' ministry, Mark suggested that Jesus' life would draw in those who were being excluded by these divisions. Jesus began a new type of social relationship with this particular healing, one that crossed boundaries and continued to mark his life and ministry as Messiah. He chose not to minister to the outcast and foreigner from a distance as Elisha had done; rather he went right up to those who needed him and touched them or allowed them to touch him.

Jesus' message that we need to touch the outcast, the "other" in our world is clear. Instead of isolating the sick and elderly, we should embrace them. Instead of incarcerating people who struggle with addiction issues, we should provide them loving environments in which to live and be nurtured toward wholeness. Instead of separating ourselves from people whose religion or culture or race we don't understand, we should live with them for a while and learn to do things in their ways.

As with most sermons I write, I'm convinced that I have enjoyed and benefitted much more from my preparation of this one than you will from hearing me share it with you this morning. Your faces have been in my head as I've put these words on paper. You do these things in your lives already. I see you do them, and I am thankful. You are the "word" and the "touch" of God to the "others" of our world. So I know that I'm not telling you anything new.

As we conclude the church season of Epiphany and enter the contemplative Lenten season in a week and a half, and right now as we affirm our faith and move into our time of corporate prayer and passing of the peace, let's all wonder whose healing could begin with our word or our touch. Let's also be receptive to the word or touch that could lead to our own healing. At the end of our wondering, I think we know that we all need to be touched by God and by one another. We all need to be healed.