

Questions of Jesus

2. "Who touched my robe?"

Text: Psalm 103, selections; Luke 8: 40-48

Rev. Dr. C. Geordie Campbell

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I want to commend you on the excellent choice you made to be here today! What, with the pace and busyness of life as it is and can be, it's no small thing to make it a priority to come to church. And in a world that increasingly competes for our personal time I am especially grateful for your presence.

I'm also glad to tell you that a virtual mountain of studies confirms that attendance at religious services is correlated with better health. Worship services are full of therapeutic elements: "music, aesthetic surroundings, familiar rituals, prayer and contemplation, distraction from everyday tensions, the opportunity for socializing and fellowship, and the invitation to the larger reality of God."ⁱ These create together the space for each of us to push the reset button of heart, mind, body and soul.

So kudos, awesome decision, excellent choice! And thank you, again!

I'll take that as a running start as we focus on the healing power of faith this morning. Even more, as we hear a few questions that Jesus asked as people came to him in search of healing from whatever malady had a hold on them.

A reminder may help. Over these Lenten Sundays, Elliott, Susan and I are spending our pulpit time on the questions that Jesus asked. A careful eye to the gospels reveals that asking questions was central to his teaching, as much as and maybe even more than parables and stories. It also reveals that healing was core to his ministry and teaching.ⁱⁱ

So what are some of the questions that the Great Physician asked as he healed people? And, more important, do they bear any living value for you and for me? Let's lean together and listen in to three of them.

Here's a first one: who touched me? Or, in an older version, who touched my robe?

Luke reports this in an encounter between Jesus and a woman who had been ill for 12 long years. She was worn down by visits to countless doctors yet she was still suffering. No one seemed able to help her. But she believed that if she could only so much as brush up against Jesus she would be well. And so it was. She reached unseen through the crowd. As she did Jesus knew the moment of her touch – even though the gaggle of people pressed in around him.

Who touched me? Jesus knew that whoever it was suffered in some way. She knew that even in the threads of his robe carried the power of God. Jesus knew that her

illness was the driving force that kept her searching. And she knew that the attentive presence of Jesus could make all the difference.

Thirty-three years ago this month our son Tim was hospitalized with collapsed lung. He had not reached his first birthday and the circumstances were overwhelming. Pam and I were frightened to the marrow. A minister friend, Rob, came to be with us at Brattleboro Hospital. I did not know he was coming up behind me. But he reached and touched my shoulder and Pam's, and, as an agent of Christ, I could feel the power flow through him from the great heart of God. It was Rob's touch that connected us to a Source Beyond, barely a thread on a hem. And Tim made it through the night.

Who touched me? Jesus wants us to wonder and to answer. As for the woman in the story, the initiative of reaching out in faith was a huge part of her return to health.

The Great Physician asks of another: what do you want me to do for you?

This time Jesus was speaking to Bartimeaus, a blind beggar who was strategically waiting, poised in a calculated setting. He knew that Jesus would be passing through the city gate as he left Jericho. And Bartimeaus trusted his best hunch that if he could cry out and get the attention of Jesus he stood a chance at being healed.

If only Jesus could hear him. If only he could make his needs known directly. If only Jesus would turn from the many in the rumbling crowd to the single heart of this man and just give him a minute, that's all.

And, of course, that's what we all want at times isn't it? Just a moment to be known for who we are and what we need; just a moment to be listened to, and deeply; and to have the courage and faith to think that we are worthy of Jesus stopping for us. Worthy of the pause of Christ.

"I've cried out plenty," she confided. "I've even shouted out. But somehow I never have the courage to see it through. Something shuts down in me. I turn back into myself and abandon my hope." I nodded as she continued, "I want God to make me well but I am embarrassed to say what I need and why. Yet I know until I do I am sabotaging and undermining my own healing."

What do you want me to do for you? It's an absolutely essential question to healing and wholeness. And Jesus still asks it across the ages. Even to you and me.

One more encounter: do you want to be well?

Jesus asked this of a man who had suffered for 38 years. It was a confronting question of the compassionate kind. It signals that Jesus was looking, fishing, searching for a deeper part of the man's story. Something about it just didn't make sense.

As you may be aware, I've been learning the art of pastoral coaching at Auburn Seminary. It's been very engaging and stimulating. One of the skills is simply called "asking powerful questions." It's far easier said than done. It's about listening to another deeply enough so that a precise question might help the other get unstuck.

Jesus was asking just such a question, one that cut to the quick and reached beyond whatever had been preventing this man's healing. And though it might seem odd that he would ask so directly sometimes it's the only way to go. Truth is "sometimes we know there is a consequence to being well that we want to avoid. After all, if we are well then we have to act and live as though we are well. That means taking full responsibility for our lives. But some people prefer illness to health because they don't want to pay the price of health." ⁱⁱⁱ Maybe even you and me.

Psychiatrist Fritz Kunkel came up with his own language for such folks. "He called them turtles because it seemed to him that they want to hide in a shell as a refuge from life; and that, over time, they need to have something such as an illness, to cling to."

So Jesus was playing a wild hunch on this one. He asked a powerful question to get to the heart: do you want to be well? It was spot-on. And he is still asking today.

So we take these three questions of Jesus with us today and carry them into Lent. They are among 304 other questions that he asked along his Palestinian way. And they live still within our time. Who touched me? What do you want me to do for you? Do you want to be well?

I promise you this. Lent and life will be richer, deeper, better, more faithful if we give them the benefit of reflection. In the name of the One who asks far more than he answers, for the very good of our souls. Amen.

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First Church
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107

ⁱ Herbert Benson, MD. Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief. Scribner, 1996. p. 174.

ⁱⁱ Martin Copenhaver. Jesus Is The Question. Abington Press, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Sanford. Healing Body and Soul: The Meaning of Illness in the New Testament and Psychotherapy. Westminster Press, 1992, pp. 28-29.