

Healing Power

**“There was a woman afflicted with hemorrhages for twelve years...
Daughter your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction.”**
(Mark 5:26, 34)

I love watching movies. One of my all time favorites in the “triumph of the human spirit” category is Elephant Man, nominated for eight academy awards in 1980. In this movie, director David Lynch tells the heartbreaking yet uplifting story of John Merrick (John Hurt), who, hideously deformed from birth, is dubbed *Elephant Man* during his many years as a circus *freak* show attraction in Victorian England. After suffering terribly, both physically and emotionally, at the hands of his sadistic circus “master,” Merrick is rescued by a compassionate doctor (Anthony Hopkins) who allows him to live at the hospital where he works. Merrick, eloquent and soft-spoken, eventually becomes a celebrity when he meets a famous British actress (Anne Bancroft), but must continue to fight for his dignity with those who still view him as a freak.

In a particularly moving scene, the actress goes to see him for the first time and offers him her hand. Merrick puts out his less deformed, left hand. Without saying a word, she gently refuses to take that hand, waiting instead for him to offer his right hand, the one customarily used for greeting. Finally, after a few awkward moments, he brings out his maimed right hand and they greet one another. It’s the first time he’s ever held a woman’s hand and it marks another milestone of his personal transformation. Healing, initiated by the doctor’s kindness, continues through the touch of a caring woman.

In today’s gospel from **Mark**, there are two requests for healing, one verbal and open; the other non-verbal and furtive, both involving interplay of faith, fear, words and touch. In the first one, Jesus says to the synagogue official, Jairus, who’s been told his

twelve year old daughter has died: *“Do not be afraid, but just have faith.”* And then Jesus takes the daughter’s hand and brings her back to life.

In the second, an unnamed woman with a long term hemorrhage is fearful of even approaching Jesus because her condition makes her ritually unclean and, therefore, a social outcast. She, nonetheless, comes up behind him in a crowd and stealthily touches his cloak. Jesus, aware of what has happened, tells her *“Daughter your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction.”*

Human touch is, indeed, powerful, for good or evil. Many of life’s deepest wounds happen from being touched inappropriately, as in sexual, physical or verbal abuse. But much of life’s deepest healing happens through appropriate, loving touch and affirming words.

Popular author and lecturer, the late Leo Buscaglia, once talked about a contest he was asked to judge. The purpose of the contest was to find the most caring child. The winner was a four year old whose next door neighbor, an elderly gentleman, recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little girl went into the old gentleman’s yard, climbed onto his lap and just sat there. When her mother asked what she had said to the neighbor, the little girl said, *“Nothing, I just helped him cry.”*

A “Peanuts” cartoon shows Charlie Brown warning Snoopy, his dog, not to go near Lucy’s house. “She’s having a ‘Crab-In’ today,” says Charlie.

Instead of heeding Charlie’s warning, Snoopy goes straight to Lucy’s house and knocks on the door. When the unhappy Lucy appears, Snoopy gives her a great big sloppy kiss. Then he walks off, saying to himself, “That’s how you break up a ‘Crab-In.’”

The medical community is well aware of the *therapeutic* value of touching. Monitoring equipment can actually measure the effects of a nurse's gentle touch on a patient. The heartbeat of an intensive care patient can often be stabilized when a nurse holds a patient's hand. Is there any doubt that a physician's caring bedside manner can help promote healing? Competency and medical skill are important, of course, but so too is the healer's heart and attitude toward the patient.

Studies show that hugging can lift depression and promote bodily growth in children. There's a direct relationship between the degree of physical closeness children experience and their physical and mental health. When our daughter Kate, now 27 years old, was a little girl and she'd bump or scrap her knee, she'd always ask Gloria or me to kiss her "boo-boo." Kissing it made her feel better. I'll bet that that still works to ease the hurt of your little ones too.

Touch deprivation, on the other hand, often leads to negative consequences like despondency, loss of appetite, apathy, and decline in efficient functioning. According to one recent study, there is a direct correlation between the degree of violence and cruelty in a culture and the amount of tactile, sensory contact among people within that culture.

A psychologist has written, "Our need to be touched is as basic as our need for food. Without it, we get a kind of *malnutrition of the spirit*." "The worst disease isn't leprosy," said Mother Teresa who cared for lepers on the streets of Calcutta, "It's being unwanted, left out, forgotten." That's why Jesus heals not only the bodies of the hurting people he encounters, but also their souls.

Ours is a society where physical contact, even within family and among friends, is oftentimes discouraged. It's natural to want to show affection, but some of us don't,

perhaps for fear of misunderstanding; or because tenderness is equated with sentimentality, weakness, unmanliness (in the case of men), or vulnerability. When I was growing up within my large demonstrative, boisterous Italian-American family, *not* to hug and kiss was considered unacceptable behavior. My relatives subscribed to the Italian folk saying: “*Pizzichi e baci non fanno buchi.*” “Kisses and pinches leave no scars.” If you were uptight about being touched and happened to attend a family gathering at my house, where just about every get together resembled a scene from Grand Opera, you would surely have been in for an unsettling experience! If you don’t believe me, just ask Gloria about the first time she met the Sciolino clan *en mass*.

There are lonely people everywhere – in nursing homes, hospitals, in prisons, in hospice care, down the hall and down the street. Why not take a moment to telephone, write a note, or drop in on someone who’s isolated by poor health, grief, or depression. Through baptism, after all, Jesus’ healing ministry continues through us.

Too often we underestimate the power of a pat on the back, a smile, a thoughtful word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, all of which have potential to turn a life around, perhaps even to save a life. How exhilarating to realize that you and I have the power to heal with nothing more complicated than a word or act of kindness.

Anthony J. Sciolino

Wisdom 1:13-15, 2:23-24; 2 Corinthians 8:7, 9, 13-15; Mark 5:21-43.

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time. June 28, 2009. (Cycle B)