

Sermon: "Transfiguring Touch."

Sunday, March 6, 2011

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Christ Church, Shaker Heights

Last Epiphany, Year A: Matthew 17:1-9

At one point or another in your Christian journey you will hear the scriptures described like an onion with an infinite number of layers to be peeled, each revealing God's meaning, or multiple meanings, found in the text. Those who have engaged in adult education at Christ Church have certainly heard me describe the Bible in this way. Well, sometimes even the teacher/preacher is brought up short by how true this simile is.

Now how many times have we heard the story of Jesus' Transfiguration in our lives? If we have been hanging around the Church a while the answer is, quite a bit. The story of the Transfiguration is found in all three of the synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It is always the Gospel lesson for the Last Sunday of Epiphany, which is today. The Transfiguration also has its own feast day on August 6th which, when it occurs on a Sunday, takes precedence for the day in the appointed lessons. So we get a fair amount of exposure to this story. Because of our familiarity with the story we may not always see meaning in it beyond what we have heard before.

Preachers, Biblical commentaries and Bible study discussions about the transfiguration tend to focus on Jesus' face shining like the sun and his cloths becoming dazzling white, which is admittedly an awe inducing event. The problem is that after a while all the sermons about this dazzling, brightness that emanates from Jesus end up sounding like commercials for laundry detergent or toothpaste. "Transfiguration: Makes cloths sparkling bright!"

This past Wednesday at our weekly Bible Study class at Panera's a new layer of the scriptural onion was peeled back for me. It was an "aha!" epiphany moment; a moment when something that had been right in front of my eyes all along jumped out at me in a new way. It occurred in the passage immediately following the one where the voice of God the Father comes from the cloud saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" We then read that, "when the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome with fear." Now this seems like a perfectly natural response after seeing your rabbi light up like a super nova, followed by a disembodied voice booming down from the cloud right above your head. Under the circumstances fear works really well for me here!

Jesus responds to his three disciples fear in this manner: "[He] came [up to them] and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.'"

It is in the action of Jesus touching his disciples and the accompanying words of comfort he offers that my epiphany moment occurred. Despite the numerous times I have read and heard the Transfiguration story, Jesus touching the disciples and its critical importance to the story never really registered with me until this past week.

Touch – human touch – is transfiguring. When Jesus touches those terrified disciples cowering on the ground he transfigures them from their fear. They become healed from the paralysis that occurs when something beyond their comprehension over-loads their circuitry and causes them to crash. In Jesus' touch and gentle words telling them to fear not, he restores the disciples to wholeness and allows them to move forward with their lives.

Touch and wholeness are intrinsically linked together in Jesus' ministry. It is his healing touch, given to those who experience illness, rejection, suffering, pain and the fear that accompanies them, that humans are transfigured into whole, healed beings. People came to understand this about Jesus and actively sought him out so that they might be touched by him or touch him themselves, so that they might no longer live in pain or fear.

“Then [Jesus] touched [the blind men's] eyes and said, ‘According to your faith let it be done to you.’ And their eyes were opened.” (Mt. 9:28-29)

“People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them.” (Mk.10:13)

“And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.” (Lk.6:19)

“Then . . . a woman who had suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, for she said if only I touch his cloak, I will be made well.” (Mt. 9:20-21)

In Fr. Jim's sermon last week he reminded us that the opposite of faith is fear. Whenever we crash and fall down from the burdens and fears that confront us in life, Jesus' touch calls us to have faith and to fear not. As he says to the blind men, “according to your faith let it be done to you.” It is through our faith we believe that with God all will be well for us despite our circumstances. This truth is powerfully conveyed by Jesus' hands as he gently touches us, lifts us and says, ‘fear not.’

The therapeutic and scientific communities have come to understand what Jesus conveyed in his touching ministry; that the healing power of touch is a powerful tool to make humans whole.

Think about your own experience. No one is exempt from needing to be touched. Humans need to touch and be touched, just like we need food and water. The connection between touch and wellbeing is far more than skin deep. From the moment

of birth our tactile sense is being stimulated. Pushed out, picked up, and slapped on the bottom, we are placed at our mother's breast, touching her skin, feeling her caress, her breath and kisses and a bonding process begins.

The need for bonding, or close physical contact with another human being, remains with us throughout our lifetime. Done appropriately, it generally feels good to have another human being touch us. We have all experienced moments when the touch of a hand on our shoulder, a reassuring hug, the holding of one hand in another, a comforting arm around the shoulder, was all that was needed to reduce our fear, anxiety, pain or loneliness. Touching is an act of love, a way of communicating without words.

Touching a person's head and praying are compelling aspects of the sacramental laying on of hands for healing and anointing with oil that we do in the Church. Science confirms what Jesus knew, that powerful healing chemicals are released into our bodies when we experience the love filled touch of another person. While the laying on of hands may not always lead to a cure, it frequently leads to serenity, peace of mind, lowered anxiety and stress levels and a feeling of being cared for. These in themselves become agents for physical, emotional and spiritual betterment and God's wholeness in a person's life.

Touching can reassure us, relax us, comfort us and bring us joy like nothing else. Witness the exchange of the Peace in this congregation. It is a touching fest of love as we shake hands, hug and exchange the kiss of Christ's peace with one another. On the first day of Unity Church's worshipping in our building last month one of their senior lay leaders came up to me and gave me a big hug, saying, "We are a church of huggers, I hope you don't mind?" I smiled and replied to her, "You have no idea how you have come to the right place!"

Touching transfigures us. We are called to be Jesus' touching, transfiguring, healing hands in the world.

Christina Forward relayed a powerful story about touch in her faith testimony last Sunday. She spoke of a summer camp experience with her church youth group where the chaplain asked the participants to gently touch the face of another participant and experience the presence of Christ in them. Christina said that when she did this and looked quietly into her partners eyes that she had a "whoa" moment; a moment when her faith was confirmed by the powerful presence of God made known in touch with another person.

So let's see if we Episcopalians can feel the powerful transfiguring presence of God made known in touch. First, take a moment to hear the voice of Jesus telling us to fear not. Now let's engage in a moment of healing, transfiguring touch.

Turn to the person nearest you and either take their hand in yours, touch their shoulder or if you are really daring, gently touch their face. Now look into their eyes and just let God's love in you be conveyed to the other person. Now keep your touch and gaze in contact, until I speak again.

Amen.