

21 March, 2004: Candidate Sharon Ferguson Who Touched Me?

Who Touched Me?

?Who touched me??

Lord, you know.
I shouldn't even be here,
offending all around me
by my blood.

?Who touched me??

Lord, I thought
in all this jostling throng
You'd surely never notice
one small hand.

?Who touched me??

Lord, I thought
I'd keep this healing secret
to myself ? too frightened
just to ask.

?Who touched me??

Lord, you know
the healing that your words
have brought. My taint is now on you.

Mark 5:25-34

Healing the Heart

This woman should not have been in the crowd that day. She was an outcast, unclean, only one step up from a leper. No man could have physical contact with her without being ritually unclean themselves. And yet she risked being recognised with all the pain and distress this would have caused because she believed that Jesus would heal her. But she didn't feel worthy enough to approach him direct. She surreptitiously touched the hem of his garment, knowing that would be enough. I often wondered why Jesus singled her out. Of course He knew who had touched him! Why did He want her to admit to it? I believe it was to teach us two things. 1) That He is aware of even the most tentative reaching out towards Him. And 2) that it doesn't matter who we are, what we've done, how other people might see us, we are all worthy of his love and healing. It is held back from no-one.

But there are many different kinds of healing. The one we think of most often is physical healing, in which a person who has been ailing is cured of a medical condition. There are other kinds of healing as well, namely spiritual and emotional healing. These conditions are every bit as devastating as physical illness, and often just as hard to cure. But I don't want to talk about cure. Cure is the elimination of the disease. Healing is much different. Healing is bringing someone who is suffering from sickness/brokenness back into a state of wholeness. The difference between health and wholeness is that you can be ill and still be whole. We may not be physically healthy, but we can have purpose and meaning in our lives.

We learn from very early on in the Scriptures that it is God's plan to restore to wholeness the earth and all who dwell there in ? and in particular to bring all people to the fullness of the joy that is possible in this world ? that fullness, that wholeness, that completeness, that integrity, that wells up as abundant life here and now ? and indeed forever. Jesus quoted the words we heard today from Isaiah, to proclaim to the community in Capernaum, and he proclaims the same message to us here today ? the eternal purpose of God ? a purpose that Jesus said was even then being fulfilled ? in places like this ? and among people and by people like you and me ? among people and by people who are called and anointed by God.

This is a place of healing. We are a congregation of healers. When each one of us walks through the door of this church and talks to another, listens to their words, is entranced by the music, is moved by the sermon, shares a joy or sorrow, lights a candle of remembrance, meditates and prays, we are healing and being healed. For we all need to be healed. We all need to allow the Holy Spirit to restore to us the inner health that comes from healing the root cause of our hurts and pains.

We are a community of believers ? and as individuals of faith ? are called by God ? each as God gifts us ? to proclaim good news to the poor, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners. To comfort those who mourn and to provide for those who grieve. In other words, to heal the brokenness in whatever form it is manifested and so bring wholeness to all people. The conditions that Isaiah talked about were not all located in the physical realm. Our bodies may be completely free in the physical sense, but we are often captive in our minds and hearts and souls. We may be bound by anxiety and fear and a sense of despair. We may mourn not simply the loss of a person dear to us, but the loss of the sense of God's care and goodness towards us and those we love. We may be bound by memories of things that have happened to us or things we have done. By not being able to ask forgiveness or to forgive. All these things keep us from that inner healing, inner peace, inner wholeness, that we have been promised.

But to heal we need to reconnect each other with the true meaning of health and wholeness, to reconnect with a deeper purpose and spirit in our lives, and to reconnect with the healing power of community.

To reconnect each other with the true meaning of health and wholeness we must first realise that healing does not mean that we are cured of our illness. So often we pray to God to heal the physical symptoms rather than to make us whole, or feel that healing hasn't taken place if the symptom persists. When we pray for healing, we are really asking Jesus to walk back into the dark places of our lives and bring healing to the distressing and painful memories of the past. We need to take Jesus into areas of our unforgiveness towards those who have taught us to fear, hate, and reject. We need to take Jesus, as pure love, into the relationships where there was no love.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, he is able to go back into our lives and heal the traumatic episodes of the past.

In the book 'Healing and the Mind', Bill Moyers interviews Rachel Remen, the medical director of Commonweal, a retreat centre for people with terminal cancer. She explains the concept of healing that they have at the centre: 'Healing may not be so much getting better, as about letting go of everything that isn't you ? all the expectations, all of the beliefs ? and becoming who you are. Not a better you, but a realer you.' 'You know we may think we need to be more in order to be whole. But in some ways, we need to be less. We need to let go, to throw away everything that isn't us in order to be more whole.'

Isn't this Christ's message throughout the Gospels. Didn't He tell the rich man to go and give everything he had away, wasn't the widow who had nothing proclaimed as being more righteous than the Pharisees, aren't we told we need to be like little children. I'm not suggesting that we all go out and give away all our possessions and that will bring about healing. I'm asking you to look at your life ? will more or better material possessions or more status make you more whole, will these things solve the problems in your life? We often cling to what we have like a drowning person to a bit of drift wood ? too afraid to let go, too scared of the unknown or lacking belief in ourselves to strike out. And yet didn't Jesus lift Peter up from the water when his faith deserted him and he started to sink, are we not told that we 'will walk on our way securely and our foot will not stumble'? The first step towards healing will always be faith ? we must actively believe that God wants us to be healed and to be whole ? so much so that God sent Jesus into this world. Our part is to trust in God, to believe in God, and to do this not only for ourselves but also for those who cannot yet trust in God themselves.

To reconnect with a deeper purpose and meaning in our lives we also need to realise that healing is not an event but a process, a journey. The purpose of life is to grow in wisdom and to learn to love ourselves and our world more fully. Our purpose as well is to heal each other and our Earth. This all takes time. I am not saying that by living spiritually meaningful lives we will never be ill, illness is part of life and often helps us to understand more of the purpose of our particular journey through life. Sometimes it can be the catalyst needed to redirect us, to get us back on track.

Four and a half years ago I was laying in a hospital bed awaiting an operation on my spine. The night before the operation I was told that it was such a delicate operation that there was no guarantee that I would be able to walk again. Well as you can see, being in a wheelchair for the rest of my life was not what God had in mind for me. But the experience and the time spent in convalescence made me realise that I had been marking time, that I was not in the

relationship I should be in, that I was not following the path that would bring about the true meaning and purpose of my life. Within a year I had resigned from my job, started a degree in Theology, entered Formation and was planning a Holy Union with a woman who fully shared my love and commitment to Jesus Christ our Lord and was prepared to support me in following the call to serve in ministry. I learned many lessons as I journeyed through the pain, fear, incapacity, and finally back to health. Many people shared parts of that journey and much of my healing came from the different relationships that developed.

There can be no doubt that we need each other to help us be healthy and whole and to find our purpose in life. We need to reconnect with the healing power of the community. I have to be honest and admit that I am probably not the easiest of patients. The independent streak in me wants to be able to do everything for myself, not to have to rely on other people or to ask people to help. During my convalescence this was one of the hardest things I had to endure. I am the one who cares for and looks after others ? not the other way round. I remember one day talking to a close friend over the phone and going on about not being able to do things and how much I hated having to bother other people etc. when my friend stopped me in mid rant. She started accusing me of being completely selfish. For a few moments I didn't understand what she was going on about. How could I be selfish not wanting to put people out in having to do things for me? I was thinking of other people! But then she said: don't you think how happy it makes your friends that they are able to show their love for you by being able to help. It's their opportunity to give ? do you want to deprive them of that? Learn how to receive for a change! Well this took me a bit by surprise, not only because it was so unlike this particular friend to speak harshly but because of the amount of truth in what she said. I can't say that receiving help immediately felt okay but I did start to see past the practical acts to the internal acts of healing that we both received in these caring situations. When we show genuine concern for each other, whether it's through prayer, sharing our stories, practical help, or any other way, we bring healing to our lives. You heal me and I heal you.

There was a study done a few years ago that showed that people who go to church on a regular basis tend to be healthier than those who don't. The religion, denomination or church makes no difference. The reason is simple: when people belong to a community of people who care about them and who they care about they are naturally healed and made whole. For most of my life I have gone to church and every Sunday gone through the ritual of sharing the peace. It has only been recently that I learned the scriptural basis for this act, but I believe it has an even more important role to play in the community of believers than just as a sign that we are okay with each other before taking communion. It provides the opportunity to heal each other through touch. Often this is no more than a shaking of hands but, Louis Armstrong, many years ago now, sung the words: I see friends shaking hands, saying ?how do you do?, they're really saying ?I love you?. Sometimes we hug each other. Not everyone is comfortable with being hugged which is rather sad really because hugging is the best medicine available. Hugging is healthy ? it helps the body's immune system, it cures depression, it reduces stress, it induces sleep, it's invigorating, it's rejuvenating, it has no unpleasant side effects. Hugging is all natural ? it's organic, naturally sweet, no pesticides, no preservatives, no artificial ingredients, and no calories. Hugging is practically perfect ? there are no movable parts to break, no batteries to wear out, no periodic check ups needed, low energy consumption, high energy yield, inflation proof, non-fattening, no monthly payments, no insurance premiums, theft-proof, non taxable, non polluting, suitable for children under and over 3 years of age, and of course, fully returnable. I would recommend taking at least one hug, three times a day, with a good helping of prayer to ensure a healthy body, mind and soul, but as I have already said, not everyone is comfortable with hugging and not everyone is comfortable with prayer and we need to be respectful of their needs. So I invite you to find your own ways in which you can heal and be healed. Find out what works for you and then use it.

Let me close with a moving story told by Rachel Remen in her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*.

I had a man in my practice with osteogenic sarcoma of the leg, which was removed at the hip in order to save his life. He was 24 years old when I started working with him and he was a very angry man with a lot of bitterness, a deep sense of injustice and a very deep hatred for all well people, because it seemed so unfair to him that he had suffered this terrible loss so early in life. After working with this man for a couple of years I saw a profound shift. He began *coming out of himself*. He began visiting other people in the hospital who had suffered severe physical losses and he would tell me the most wonderful stories about these visits. Once he visited a young woman who was almost his age. It was a hot day in Pal Alto and he was in running shorts so his artificial leg showed when he came into her room. The woman was so depressed about the loss of both her breasts that she wouldn't even look at him, wouldn't pay any attention to him. The nurses had left her radio playing, probably in order to cheer her up. So, desperate to get her attention, he unstrapped his leg and began dancing around the room on one leg, snapping his fingers to the music. She looked at him in amazement, and then she burst out laughing and said, *Man, if you can dance, I can sing.*

This is a beautiful story because it shows how strong we can be in spite of our diminished health or perhaps even because of it. But listen now to the rest of his story:

At the end of therapy you do a review people talk about what was significant to them and you share what was significant to you as a therapist working with someone. We were reviewing our two years of work together; I opened his file and there folded up were several drawings he had made early on. I wanted to return these to him, so I unfolded them and handed them to him. He looked through them and said, *Oh, look at this.* And he showed me one of the earliest drawings. I had suggested to him that he draw a picture of his body. He had drawn a picture of a vase, and running through his vase was a deep black crack. This was his image of his body and he had taken a black crayon and had drawn the crack over and over and over. He was grinding his teeth with rage at the time. It was very, very painful because it seemed to me that this vase could never function as a vase again. It could never hold water. Now, two years later, he came to this picture and looked at it and said, *Oh, this one isn't finished.* And I said, extending the box of crayons, *Why don't you finish it?* He picked up a yellow crayon and putting his finger on the crack he said, *You see, here this is where the light comes through.* And with the yellow crayon he drew light streaming through the crack in his body.

Please pray with me

We ask your presence among us, O God, Creator of the universe, Sustainer of life, Redeemer of humankind; help us to learn how to grow strong at the broken places in our lives, to find purpose in our pain, and in the darkest of times, in the turmoil of grief, or the depression of disability, bring your healing light and power into our wounded hearts and bodies and minds and souls. Clear the way for each of us to discover within ourselves the fullness of your power and all of your wondrous blessings; help us dear God to respond to your vast love and to bless you, so that we may be a beacon through which you may shine into the world.

Amen

James 5:13-16

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous is powerful and effective.

Isaiah 61:1-3

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives. And release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.