

Pentecost 5/Lectionary 13

June 28, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

Psalm 130

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Mark 5:21-43

One of my college textbooks posed the following questions:

“Suppose someone with AIDS bought a sweater sealed in a plastic bag and put it away in a drawer for a year; would you wear it if they gave it to you?

“When you are in class and don't want the professor to call on you, if you think about her calling on you, does this increase the chances that she really will?

“Imagine that someone offered you a piece of chocolate shaped like a spider – would you eat it?”¹

In our rational minds we know that the answers to these questions should be: Yes, you would wear the sweater; No, thinking about your professor calling on you in class won't increase the odds that she will call on you; and, Yes, you would eat a chocolate shaped like a spider, because, after all, it's still chocolate, isn't it?

But let's be honest here – would you really eat a chocolate shaped like a spider? I imagine there are more than a few of us here who would give a pass on that one!

These three questions expose what psychologists like to call “Magical Thinking.” My textbook says that, “Such thinking makes assumptions that don't hold up to rational scrutiny but which are compelling nonetheless.”²

One principle of magical thinking is what is called the law of contagion: it's when we think “that when two objects touch, they pass properties to one another, and that the effects of contact may last well beyond the end of the contact between them.”³ This is what most of us normally think of as “getting cooties” from something.

For reasons we don't fully understand, the ancient Hebrews felt the same about a few things. Certain animals, foods, diseases, body fluids, and dead things made the people say, "Ugh! Don't touch them!" Such things were "unclean" or "impure." If you touched them you became unclean. If you had one of the diseases, you became unclean. Anything or anyone that you touched became unclean.

Being unclean was the opposite of being holy. Being unclean meant that you couldn't come to the holy temple to worship the holy God. Anything unclean was unfit or unworthy to be in the presence of the holy God. If you were unclean, you had to go through a rite of purification or cleansing in order to be welcome back into society and into the presence of God.

The use of the word "unclean" can be misleading. It doesn't mean "dirty" like a two-year-old playing in the mud, but more like the phrase "dirty, old man." He's someone others try to avoid.

Being unclean refers to the relationship between people or things and God. In some ways it may be like someone telling another, "Don't touch me!" There is something about the relationship that is estranged. Unclean things and people were estranged from God and each other. They weren't supposed to touch each other.

In some ways their view of unclean things is like our saying, "One bad apple spoils the whole bunch." Contact with one of these unclean things made you an unclean person. There is some truth to this. If you hang around someone with a contagious disease, you are likely to end up with the same sickness. If you hang around with the wrong group of people, their bad influence may "spoil" you. There are some good reasons to stay away from certain people and things.

Jesus mixes everything up. Jesus doesn't become unclean by contact with the unclean people. They don't bring him down to their level. Jesus' holiness transforms their uncleanness. The flow of blood is stopped. The woman is healed. The corpse comes back to life. The young girl gets out of bed. God participates [in] a feast with tax collectors and sinners. With people in situations that others said, "Ugh" to, Jesus has no ughs!! He has a hug – or at least a healing touch. Jesus' holiness transforms the people's uncleanness. Jesus raises them up to his level. Jesus makes them worthy to be in the presence of God. Jesus, as the one good, holy apple, can make all the bad apples become good.

Sometimes our lives may seem full of ughs. We may think that we are terrible, rotten, ugh-ly people. Jesus doesn't think so. To him, there are no ughs. Whomever he touches becomes clean and holy and beautiful.⁴

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In just a few minutes we'll all witness Jesus coming to touch and bring healing, in a very special way. Today Kaden Blakey will be baptized. Jesus will come with his healing touch, in the water and the word of promise, to heal for Kaden that age-old affliction of sin sickness. This is no magical thinking, for Jesus will indeed give to Kaden his own righteousness in exchange for the stain of original sin. Kaden will be washed clean, be made holy, and claimed as one of God's own beloved children.

And for us baptized, we come into contact with Jesus again and again, in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, when Jesus once again gives us his righteousness in exchange for our sin. This is no magical thinking. This is most certainly true.

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I'd like to close today's message to you with a poem I came across last week. It very much has to do with this question of touch and transformation. But first I have to set the stage... This poem was written by Ann Weems and published in 1980. Some of you may remember that when the green *Lutheran Book of Worship* came out in the late '70s, there was a lot of controversy about the Passing of the Peace in worship. I think this poem was probably written in response to similar controversy in the poet's own Presbyterian church, which had adopted the practice at about the same time we Lutherans did. This poem is called "Touch in Church."

What is all this touching in church?

It used to be a person could come to church and sit in the pew
and not be bothered by all this friendliness
and certainly not by touching.

I used to come to church and leave untouched.

Now I have to be nervous about what's expected of me.

I have to worry about responding to the person sitting next to me.

Oh, I wish it could be the way it used to be;

I could just ask the person next to me: How are you?

And the person could answer: Oh, just fine,

And we'd both go home . . . strangers who have known each other
for twenty years.

But now the minister asks us to look at each other.

I'm worried about that hurt look I saw in that woman's eyes.

Now I'm concerned,

because when the minister asks us to pass the peace,

The man next to me held my hand so tightly

I wondered if he had been touched in years.

Now I'm upset because the lady next to me cried and then apologized

And said it was because I was so kind and that she needed

A friend right now.

Now I have to get involved.

Now I have to suffer when this community suffers.

Now I have to be more than a person coming to observe a service.

That man last week told me I'd never know how much I'd touched his
life.

All I did was smile and tell him I understood what it was to be lonely.

Lord, I'm not big enough to touch and be touched!

The stretching scares me.

What if I disappoint somebody?

What if I'm too pushy?

What if I cling too much?

What if somebody ignores me?

"Pass the peace."

"The peace of God be with you." "And with you."

And mean it.

Lord, I can't resist meaning it!

I'm touched by it, I'm enveloped by it!

I find I do care about that person next to me!
I find I am involved!
And I'm scared.
O Lord, be here beside me.
You touch me, Lord, so that I can touch and be touched!
So that I can care and be cared for!
So that I can share my life with all those others that belong to you!
All this touching in church – Lord, it's changing me!⁵

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Jesus touched and transformed people he came into contact with. He continues to touch and transform lives today. May he reach into each of our hearts with his healing touch, transforming each of us into his likeness more and more each day. And may we share that healing touch, the love of Christ, with all those with whom we come into contact.

Amen.

[1,482 words]

1 Robert A. Baron & Donn Byrne, *Social Psychology, Ninth Edition* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2000), 100-1.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*

4 Brian Stoffregen, *Exegetical Notes at Crossmarks Christian Resources*, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/mark5x21.htm>, downloaded 6/17/2009.

5 Ann Weems, "Touch in Church" in *Reaching for Rainbows* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1980).