

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
February 5, 2012
Mark 1:29-39

“The peace of the Lord be with you always”

*Come Holy Spirit! Come and bless us all.
Fill the hearts of your faithful,
and kindle in us the fire of your love. Amen.*

YOU, my beloved Church family, are very good at many things! You are strong, deep, faithful pray-ers. You love God and you work hard to create the inbreaking of the kingdom of God on earth with your acts of service and generosity. You take very good care of each other—calling, writing and visiting when fellow church members are ill or in trouble. You delight in the diversity of the human family, and you warmly welcome visitors to our church home. You commit untold, countless hours to the work of the Church week after week—Monday through Saturday.

YOU, my beloved Church family, are very good at many things.

But there is one thing you are not so good at. In fact you sort of fail miserably. The area where you try but don't succeed involves hugging....I mean NOT hugging. You always hug each other even when I have announced that the Church is a hug-free zone due to all the sickness going around. Despite my warning and scolding, you insist on hugging. Despite the announcement: **“This winter we are officially a HUG-FREE ZONE,”** written in bold in the Bulletin for weeks, you insist on hugging. You hug when you come in the back door, you hug when you enter the Sanctuary, you hug on the “the line” after our worship service, and you hug during Coffee Hour. No amount of dire warnings from me has diminished your hugging.

And you know what? I understand. And I am moved by it. And you're right. We are a tactile people. Furthermore, ours is a tactile faith.

Christianity is certainly about hearing the WORD but it is also about feeling the TOUCH. We are people who touch—to bless, to comfort, to heal, to welcome. We touch.

We touch when we pass the peace of the Lord;
we touch when we share Communion and you come forward and I place bread in your open hands;
we touch when we baptize babies and I hold them and splash water on their perfect heads;
we touch when I anoint your heads with oil during a healing;
we touch when I make a black cross on your foreheads on Ash Wednesday;
we touch when we do a laying on of hands for someone who is sick, or for our Confirmands, or when someone is ordained;
we touch when we share in the ritual washing of feet;
we touch when we hold hands during the Benediction and you receive a final blessing.

Ours is a tactile faith.

Touch is healing. We touch because we are warm and loving people, **we also touch because we are Christians.** We follow Jesus, and Jesus did a lot of touching. Touch was central to Jesus' ministry. His touch not only brought comfort and healing but without saying a word, Jesus was challenging the boundaries, norms and accepted cultural practices of his time. Jesus touched those considered untouchable. So without preaching about the deep significance of his touch, Jesus' actions conveyed a powerful message of love and acceptance. Touch was central to Jesus' ministry and the fact that he touched untouchables was scandalous. But Jesus was intentional about who he touched and he was bold—bold to touch those ignored, spurned, and scorned by others.

Jesus touched menstruating women, which was forbidden.

Jesus touched lepers, who were considered unclean.

Jesus touched children, normally banished from adult company.

Jesus touched tax collectors, who were despised.

Jesus touched poor people, who were considered beneath him.

Jesus touched those possessed by demons, who were driven out of the village.

Jesus touched people who had died, which meant he then needed ritual cleansing.

Jesus touched all kinds of people with his hands. Often. Daily.

Jesus touched people. And we are Jesus-followers.

Ours is a tactile faith.

In today's reading from the Book of Mark, we hear that Jesus marches right into the bedroom of an old, sick woman and touches her.

Right into her bedroom. A woman...old...sick. No one but Jesus would do that.

29 As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. Jesus does not ignore her and say oh what a shame. He goes right into her bedroom...but he does not kneel in silent prayer at her bedside, he does not say: get the physician, he does not stand over her and pronounce a blessing, he does not sprinkle her with holy water.

Jesus takes the woman by the hand and lifts her up.

He touches her.

32 That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. ³³And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons...

That evening they bring everybody who is sick and filled with demons, those who are acting wild, those who, the Bible says, have "various diseases." The whole city gathers at the house! And the Bible says Jesus cures them...how?

He used what he had...two things: word and touch. That's all he had.

35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶And Simon and his companions hunted for him.

³⁷When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.'

He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' ³⁹*And he went throughout*

Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Everywhere Jesus goes, he preaches, and he touches. He casts out demons by touching people. Rev. Mike Graves, of the Saint Paul School of Theology, reflecting on this passage in Mark writes, "Preaching and healing. Healing and preaching. This represents the ministry of Jesus in a nutshell, and it represents still the ministry of those who follow him."

That's us! We are those who follow him!

And so we touch...we touch because it conveys our love for each other, because it brings comfort, and because we are Jesus-followers, and Jesus touched those around him day after day after day.

Ours is a tactile faith.

When we pass the peace, we say: "The peace of the Lord be with you always..." and we embrace or shake hands. We don't tend to wave at each other, or to bow.

We touch. “The peace of the Lord be with you always,” we say as we look at each other and hold hands or hug.

When we pass the peace, we recognize that we are channels of God’s love and grace and we are sharing that with each other. We recognize that we are conduits—receiving God’s love and grace and passing that energy, that goodness, that radiance from person to person all around the room.

We pass the peace with two things: word and touch. That’s what we have.

“The peace of the Lord be with you always....” those are precious words and a heart-warming sentiment BUT those simple words also make a profound political statement. The word for peace in the original Greek is “eirene” which means peace, but a specific kind of peace. **“Eirene” is meant to convey peace through reconciliation**—the meaning of eirene stands in sharp contrast to the idea of peace through war. “Eirene” specifically means peace through reconciliation, love, and forgiveness—NOT peace through combat, violence and war.

To understand this contrast fully remember when and where Jesus lived. He lived in ancient Israel in the time of the Roman Empire. He and all Jews were an occupied people. Israel was an occupied nation. And what did the Roman Empire reply on to “keep the peace?” The Roman army. The unifying principle of the Roman Empire was “peace through victory!” That was Pax Romana. Peace through victory means peace through conquest, peace through military might, peace by crushing one’s enemies, peace through force, peace through bloodshed. THAT is Pax Romana.

And then came Jesus...nonviolent, unarmed Jesus—with the radical notion of EIRENE. There, amidst all the trappings of Empire, Jesus introduces a different kind of peace...peace through reconciliation, peace through love, peace through forgiveness. This was radical, counter-cultural, and unacceptable.

With Pax Romana, peace through victory, as the common understanding of peace, peace through reconciliation was heretical, disloyal, treacherous. Jesus was brave to speak of eirene, peace through love. And he was labeled dangerous.

When we take hands and we pass the peace, when we hug and say, “The peace of the Lord be with you always...” we are honoring that different kind of peace that Jesus brought to the world. We are rejecting peace through victory, peace through violence, peace through intimidation. We are embracing each other and the understanding of peace through reconciliation, peace through love, peace through

forgiveness. And even more than that, we are following Jesus, we are being faithful to Jesus—using what he used during his entire ministry: words and touch. When we share in the passing of the peace, we are being Jesus-like, using what he had, doing what he did, relying on our words and on our touch.

The miracle we hear about in today's reading from the Gospel of Mark—curing Simon's mother-in-law by touching her and lifting her up out of her bed—occurs early in Jesus ministry. Mark's prose is spare—Mark presents the problem and Jesus' response to it: Jesus lifted, or raised, the sick woman up. In doing so, he restored her to her rightful place and role, and she proceeded to offer hospitality and serve her guests. The whole interaction between Jesus and Simon's mother-in-law is a kind of conspiracy to show what Jesus' entire ministry will be about: wholeness, healing, service, and touch. Simon's mother-in-law has been called “the first deacon” of the church because of this interaction. And all Jesus used was his touch. He took her hand and her life was restored.

Now think of how and when we touch here in this Church.
Think of how healing and restorative touch can be here in this Church.
Think of how you have been held here, when you were crying.
Think of how you have held a baby, maybe one of the triplets, who was passed down the pew to be rocked and comforted.
Think of how our ushers hold hands when they come forward to take the offering...Sunday after Sunday.
Think of how we did a laying on of hands when we blessed the 13 Saints among us who kept this Church alive when this congregation was down to just them.
Think of how I touch your hand when I serve you the bread during Communion.
Think of how you take hands when we say the closing Benediction and, holding on to each other, you bow your heads to receive a final blessing.

And think about the passing of the peace...how you hug when you say “The peace of the Lord be with you always...”
Peace through reconciliation, peace through forgiveness, peace through love.
Peace and healing through touch.
Amen.