

The Lutheran Church of the Atonement  
Florissant, Missouri  
Proper 5 -- Year A  
June 10-11, 2023  
Hosea 5:15-6:6; Romans 4:13-25  
St. Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

I suspect that most of us now laugh -- or at least smile -- when we see someone driving down the road, all alone in the car, with the windows rolled up, still wearing a face mask. And, we find ourselves wondering, "What are they thinking!" Slowly but surely, the Covid-19 experience is fading from our minute-by-minute consciousness. Life in many ways is returning to normal, whatever "normal" is. And, while some of us, tragically, must continue to live with the life-altering consequences of Covid-19, most of us are glad that so many of the restrictions mandated by authorities have been lifted. No longer are small businesses effectively shut down. No longer are children's playgrounds off-limits. No longer are masks required, even in hospitals or on airplanes. No longer are we limited to one-person-at-a-time in the restrooms. And, the hymnals are now back in the pews. And, the focus now is on a lively debate as to how efficacious those (and so many more) restrictions actually were. It may well be that, years from now, historians and scientists will look back and wonder, "What were they thinking?"

But, all societies have hygiene protocols. We only notice them, when, as with Covid-19, they are imposed suddenly and drastically. And, yet, we all learn the importance of washing our hands and cleaning our dishes and changing our sheets, and we don't usually give it a second thought. If we did, we'd spend way too much time talking about bacteria and viruses, about infection and contagion, and about all of the steps needed to stay healthy.

In societies before the advent of penicillin, when medicine couldn't deal with infections as readily as we do now, societies had strict rules about what one could or couldn't touch -- and, further, about what to do if someone did contact

something considered "impure." These weren't silly or arbitrary regulations; they didn't suggest that society was being legalistic or ritualistic. These regulations were simply the best a society could do to keep people healthy and to avoid a widespread outbreak of disease. And, perhaps, the regulations we are most keenly aware-of are those we find in the Bible, as further codified and practiced by devout and observant Jews in order to keep their people from getting sick. Two things were near the top of their list: two things to avoid if one wanted to stay "pure" were dead bodies and women with internal bleeding (including menstrual bleeding).\* In today's Gospel reading, Jesus encounters both.

Jesus is touched by a woman with a 12-year unabated hemorrhage, and He in turn touches the corpse of a young girl. And, since Matthew was most likely writing for a Jewish audience his readers would surely have gotten the message. These instances of touching would have rendered Jesus doubly "unclean." Under normal circumstances, Jesus would have had to remove Himself from the presence of others, to bathe Himself, to wash His clothes, and to wait a full day before restoring His normal activities. That was simply the protocol. That's what Matthew's readers would have expected. No-one would have wondered, "What was He thinking?"

But, let me suggest that Matthew wants us to see this as an enacted parable, much as when Jesus pronounced God's judgment on the Temple by driving out the merchants and moneychangers. Just look at what happens. First, a prominent local official, looked up to by the entire community, sets aside all of the dignity and trappings of his office to run up to Jesus and to kneel before Him on the dusty road in the conviction that Jesus is the One -- and the only One -- who can deal with the loss and the death his family has experienced. And, then, moments later, the woman with the bleeding condition

defies all of the health protocols of her community in order to touch the tassels on Jesus's cloak -- an unspoken acknowledgement that Jesus is God's Messiah. And, instead of recoiling at this act of touching, Jesus commends her. Whereupon, Jesus goes and takes the hand of the young girl who has died. He touches the corpse. And, I'm sure most of the crowd was wondering, "What is He thinking?"

But, therein lies the essence of this two-part story. Instead of their uncleanness, their impurity, their possible contagion infecting Jesus, exactly the opposite happens. His power "infects" their lives to restore them to health, to family, and to the full life of the community.

But, therein also lies the enacted parable. We live in a world that is infected (infected with sin), contagious (contagious with hatred), and hemorrhaging (hemorrhaging with greed), a world unclean in ways too countless to enumerate, a world where death seems always to get the final word. And, Jesus comes into this world, just as He came into that village in Galilee. He came, knowing that uncleanness would surround Him and that death would confront Him. And, yet, our uncleanness doesn't sully Him; our contagion doesn't infect Him; our impurity doesn't corrupt Him. And, when our world conspires to get the last word by putting Him to death, exactly the opposite happens. Jesus rises to give life the last word. And, as a result, for all those whose lives He touches, He gives the gift of restoration and wholeness, of community and fellowship, of life, of new life, of abundant life, of resurrection life.

And, the key to it all, just as it was in that dusty Galilean village, was faith. The faith that led a respected local leader to kneel in the dust and to confess that, if Jesus would only touch his daughter's hand, she would live, ...the faith that led an ostracized woman to make her way through a crowd simply to touch the tassels on His cloak, in the

conviction that He was God's Messiah who could restore her to wholeness and to her community. The key to it all is indeed that same faith, the faith that can lead us to make our way through the crowds and confusion of our world to find that same Jesus whose touch can bring us life and wholeness.

It's funny how we can look back at all those ancient protocols that kept people apart and kept people even from touching, and how we can regard them as silly and arbitrary, as legalistic and ritualistic. And, yet when Covid-19 struck, what were we told? We were told to "social distance" and given lists of what not to touch. But, when it comes to what really infects the world, sin and hatred and greed, Jesus summons us in the opposite direction, into community, into fellowship, into a life of sharing, touching hurting lives with the healing touch of Jesus. And, as we touch lives with Jesus's touch of love and mercy and understanding, perhaps someone will notice and even wonder, "What are they thinking?" Amen