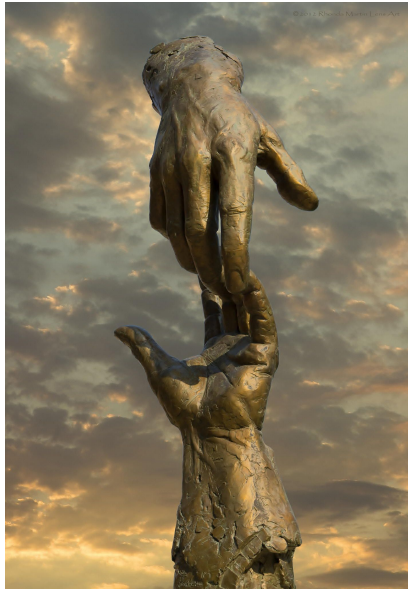


the language of touch

Robert Steiner

Part 1



- Gary Price

As Jesus begins his ministry in the Gospel of Mark, he discovers the language of touch:

I am reading from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 1, verses 29-31:

On leaving the synagogue, they went straight to the house of Simon and Andrew; and James and John went with them. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. As soon as they told him about her, Jesus went and took hold of her hand, and raised her to her feet. The fever left her, and she attended to their needs.

Our biblical text describes a small episode, couched between a dramatic exorcism and a sensational healing of a man with leprosy.

It is an unassuming and inconspicuous interlude. But maybe this is what makes it so exciting. An ordinary scene, a fleeting and tender moment. After the big performance in the synagogue of Capernaum, we now get an intimate view behind the curtains.

As we enter the house of Simon and Andrew,

we are told that the disciples immediately tell Jesus that Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever.

And so even in Peter's home, which was supposed to be a place of refuge and privacy, even there Jesus does not come to rest.

I wish Mark would have told us the name of Peter's mother-in-law. But in those times women had no social status apart from their relationships to males, usually their fathers or husbands.

We know very little about her.
Why does she stay in the house of her son-in-law?
Where is her daughter or her husband?
Does she not have her own place?
Or is she there to receive the care and support of her extended family?

Mark might be highlighting the degree of her social anonymity by introducing her to us through her son-in-law.

Does the fact that her healing is recorded in between the healing of two outcasts reinforce her marginal position in society?

The woman's illness certainly intensified her invisibility. We don't know how long she has been sick.

But as Jesus enters her room, the enormous social distance that illness and marginalization create is slowly overcome.

Mark's speaks of a fever. In Luke's Gospel it is no longer just a fever, but a high fever. Why does Luke have to make the healing more dramatic and spectacular?

Is this not worthy of Jesus, to minister to someone who is suffering of a slightly raised temperature?
Does the ordinary always have to be extraordinary when it comes to Jesus?

And where does this leave us then, with our mostly ordinary lives?

Mark is not worried. He keeps it simple and ordinary: A young man is made aware of an older woman with fever.

And he responds with love and care. That's all that matters.
It is an intimate and private encounter,
not meant to draw attention or to prove anything.

What matters to Mark possibly more is
not the actual healing, but what follows it.
We will come to that at the end.

But in times like these, with a pandemic where
fever possibly signals a serious infection,
the little episode, often overlooked,
calls for a deeper listening.

Part 2



-unknown

Jesus went and took hold of her hand ...

It is difficult to be in the world, especially
when the world seems hostile and dangerous,
violating our body and our longing for safety.

In periods of isolation and social distancing
we become more aware of how much
we need to be touched. The intimacy of touch,
of an embrace, reminds us that we are our bodies,
and that to feel that we belong
is not an intellectual exercise
but involves all our senses, especially
the sense of touch.

Notice how often Jesus touches people
in the process of healing them.
To be touched is to be moved to a place
of warmth, acceptance and homecoming.

The balsam of touch: It calms the heart beat,
lowers the blood pressure, brings down

the level of stress hormones, and strengthens the immune system.

The sense of touch is the first bodily sense developed in an embryo. And our skin becomes the biggest sensory organ. It covers the whole surface of our body. Our skin is made up of millions of highly sensitive sensors, who immediately tell us when something is happening to our skin. Think of how a little breeze feels like, a drop of sweat running down your forehead, an ant crawling over your toes.

Psychologists tell us that no mammal can develop properly without contact. Physiotherapists notice how negative feelings can be released through a massage. A gentle touch on our shoulder, our back, or our stomach can generate feelings of wellbeing. But it can also release tears, when one realizes for how long one has not been touched.

John O'Donohue reminds us that the power of touch comes from living "inside the wonderful world of skin." He explains how "Our skin is alive and breathing, always active and ever present." It matters, O'Donohue points out, that "we live not within shells, but within skin which is always sensitive to the force, touch and presence of the world."

Is it a mere co-incidence that Jesus's first home visit is to a mother-in-law?

I am wondering, what caused her fever?
A viral infection?
Or the heartbreak caused by her son-in-law Peter, who left his job to follow a wandering charismatic preacher?

This Jesus from Nazareth touched her son-in-law's heart. But how can a blessing bring forth both joy and pain? Her daughter is left without a breadwinner. It was hard enough to be married to a poor fisherman. Many good reasons to get feverishly worried

about the future of her family.

But one could also think more broadly
of how mother-in-laws often have
a difficult part to play. There is a reason
why they are often the subject matter of
ridicule or rude accusations.

Some even wonder if the mentioning
of the mother-in-law in between the demoniac
and the leper in the Gospel of Mark
constitutes some kind of ancient joke.

Psychologists tell us that mother-in-laws
are usually made to embody all the things
we dislike about our partners.
They become the scape-goats
for everything that we cannot tolerate
about the other or for what we feel
could endanger our partnership.

Projecting negative feelings about our partner
onto our mother-in-law is a clever coping strategy
but unfair and fortunately not sustainable.
Certainly an understandable cause for bouts of fever.

Whatever the reasons might have been,
Jesus cares for her deeply enough
to be present to her.

How many layers there can be to a brief encounter.
How much promise can a simple visitation hold.
How subversive a loving gesture can be.

Sister, brother, never underestimate
how much you have to give with a simple touch.

Will painful absence of touch
that so many go through at the moment
inspire an awakening,
a new language of care
a celebration of touch?

Part 3



- Joost van Geel

... and raised her to her feet.

Was this the first healing of Jesus?
Was this the first time that he noticed
that there is a power running through him.

What a moment in a young person's life,
when she or he discovers that they can be of help,
that their presence makes an enormous difference.

A little breakthrough.
A wonderful affirmation.
Someone is discovering his gifts.

And we never stopping asking ourselves:
What can I do?
What am I here for?
Who will I be?

How different this scene is from the previous one.
What a big and noisy performance it was
in the synagogue.

How quiet and peaceful this house visit is.

No words are spoken.
No words are needed.
He simply takes her hand.

Again Luke's version of the healing involves more drama.
A high fever calls for more than a touch.

Luke has Jesus stand over her, rebuking the fever.

But Mark preserves the original simplicity of the encounter.

Does she initially resist?
Is he not worried to keep a safe distance?

How did he take her hand?
Was he standing or rather
sitting at her bedside?

The artist Joost van Geel
portrays Jesus standing beside her.
It is a tender moment.
He is fully present,
his eyes almost closed.

He is holding her wrist
with his delicate right hand,
like a doctor would do,
who tries to feel the patient's pulse.
But Jesus's left hand holds her beneath
the shoulder and is trying to offer some strength and reassurance.

There is a quiet confidence,
trusting the connection,
resting in the moment.

Again John O'donahue seems to speak
directly into our scene when he says:
"Touch is such an immediate sense.
It can bring you in from the false world,
the famine world of exile and image.
Rediscovering the sense of touch returns you
to the hearth of your own spirit, enabling you
to experience again warmth, tenderness and belonging.
At the highest moments of human intensity,
words become silent. Then, the language of touch
really speaks."

Peter stands more behind than beside him,
looking over Jesus's shoulder.
His lips seem to form a smile,
his facial expression conveying
a sense of accomplishment and pride.
He fully trusts Jesus and watches with
great expectation.

Peter must be glad that the two,
Jesus and his mother-in-law are

finally meeting each other.

For how long did Jesus hold her hand?
He must have held it long enough to heal
what needed to be healed.

A simple touch and the pain is gone.
A slight contact and balance is restored.
The experience is immediate and real.

This moment of closeness carries a message
that must have come to her from very far,
and it reaches a place within her
she might have forgotten existed.

The word Mark uses to describe the cure
is the same word Mark uses repeatedly to speak
of Jesus's resurrection. She is raised up
just as Jesus will be raised to new life
after his death.

We become witnesses of a small resurrection.

Part 4



-Rembrandt

The fever left her, and she attended to their needs.

Note how the fever left her after he raised her up.
Something shifted in the moment of rising.
She clearly trusted him.

The Greek text literally says that
“the fever released her”.

The healing carries associations
of liberation, of being set free.

But set free to do what?
To go back to her traditional role and duties?
There is a new freedom to break free
from what is expected of her.

She is not just healed from her fever.
She is not just restored to daily life.
She is also able to hold a new understanding of Jesus
which, until now, she might have been too shy,
or too anxious or too angry to hold.

The text leaves us guessing.
Mark says as much as he leaves unsaid.
He conceals as much as he reveals.

But with her being raised
she must have experienced a new calling.

Our translations says that
"she attended to their needs."
That does not sound like a liberation.

Patriarchy allowed many interpreters
to get away with portraying Peter's mother-in-law
as getting up and serving the disciples supper.

But the Greek verb used is *diakoneo* and means "to serve",
but not in the sense of serving tea, but in Mark's Gospel
clearly in the sense of discipleship. The word deacon
derives from the same Greek word.

The verb *diakoneo* describes in Mark's Gospel
the essence of discipleship
and what is at the heart of Jesus's ministry:

"If anyone wants to be first,
he will be the last of all
and the servant (*diakonos*) of all" (9:35)

"Whoever wants to be great among
you will become your servant (*diakonos*). . .
For the son of man did not come to be served
but to serve (*diakoneo*)" (10:43-45).

Note that Peter's mother-in-law
becomes the only person in the entire gospel
to be described as "*diakonos*". And in terms of

Mark's story she is the first to act like Jesus and share in his ministry of servanthood.

Rembrandt's drawing gives beautiful expression to the way Jesus empowers Peter's mother-in-law to take up the role of a disciple.

Jesus is not just helping her to get going with her household duties. He pulls her up, with both hands, restores her and moves her from the fringes of society to follow her as one of his disciples.

And what a ministry it is. Mark tells us:

"That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases."

They all gathered at the door, the door of her house. The rumor of her healing must have spread quickly. Did you notice? It does not say that the sick came to be healed. They were brought to Jesus by family members and friends, by those who cared for them and desperately wanted them to be well again.

We have seen what a moment of reunion and homecoming looks like after having been isolated and made invisible for weeks or even months in hospital.

It is the caring touch of nurses, caregivers and doctors, their focused and committed presence at the bedside, that helps patients to make it through.

Every healing is a small resurrection. The fever releases her and she serves her community.

There was an awakening,
a new language of care,
a celebration of touch.

Amen.

References:

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