

“In Touch”
Matthew 20:29-34

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November 1, 2009

As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, ‘Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!’ The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, ‘Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!’ Jesus stood still and called them, saying, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ They said to him, ‘Lord, let our eyes be opened.’ Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him.

As always I am grateful to be here—grateful to be in your company and grateful to be gathered with you in worship. Not that anyone is keeping track, but this is my 50th sermon with you here at First Presbyterian. (Ok, so maybe I’m keeping track.) But I just thought I’d share that little tidbit with you. This means that so far, you’ve heard me preach for somewhere around 12 or 13 hours. I guess we can all be grateful that these sermons come in installments.

I’ve got nothing special planned for my 50th sermon—nothing special other than another attempt to speak to that which is beyond words and to sense God’s direction in our midst. I am so often humbled by that task, and I am thankful that I am never doing it alone. What I mean by that is that on any given Sunday morning, I may come to this pulpit with a sermon prepared—a few things to say, a few explanations, some biblical historical context, some stories, sometimes a song. But you come too, with your own thoughts and questions and eagerness to know and be known. You arrive in this sanctuary on Sunday morning with your thinking and wondering, and that’s a key part of what happens here each week.

I remember preaching one day—not here, but somewhere else—and I was so anxious about my sermon. I had worked and worked on it, but no matter what I did, I just felt like the whole thing was way too heady and ethereal. Try as I might, I couldn’t come up with any stories or concrete illustrations to share with the congregation. Going into that worship service, I thought to myself, “Well this has about got to be the most useless sermon ever.” But I preached it, feeling disappointed that I hadn’t somehow found something to connect what I was saying to everyday life.

And then after the service was over, people were filing out. “Nice sermon... Nice sermon...” But a man approached me and said something I will never forget. He said, “Ben, I want to thank you for that sermon. The way you used stories and examples to illustrate what you were saying really, really spoke to me.” I was stunned, of course—I hadn’t even used *one* story or example! Not even *one*! But I realized something that day. We make sermons together, you and me. Every time we gather in this place, we bring with us our own thoughts and stories, and we make sermons together.

I once read an article by Fred Rogers—you remember him, Mr. Rogers of Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood? You may not know this, but Mr. Rogers was a Presbyterian minister. The article was in a journal of preaching, and he was reflecting on a worship experience he’d had while visiting a church. He said that he was sitting there, listening to the sermon, and thinking to

himself, “This just might be the absolute worst sermon I have ever heard in my entire life.” And it’s kind of funny to think of Mr. Rogers, of all people, saying something like this, but he said that the sermon that Sunday morning was simply terrible—painful to listen to and then completely forgettable.

Fred Rogers wrote, then, that when the sermon was over, the congregation stood to sing a hymn, and the woman who happened to be sitting next to him handed him a hymnal. And he turned and saw that she was weeping. He wondered for a second what he should say or do, but she leaned over and through her tears whispered to him, “Wasn’t that the best sermon you have ever heard in your life?” And so Mr. Rogers wrote that it was on that day that he learned that the distance between someone trying to preach the Word of God and a person in need is holy ground.

I think that’s true. All the distance between us is holy ground. And the holiness of this moment and the next is not dependent on what I have to say, but rather on who we are, on why we’re here, and on God’s presence, which certainly cannot be summed up in one sermon, let alone fifty.

Perhaps especially today we bring much with us that would make these moments holy and meaningful. Today is All Saints Day, and so we remember today those saints—those men and women who have died this past year, whose presence lingers with us and still shapes our living. In a few moments, we will read the list of names of those who we’ve lost since this time last year. And as we do, members of those families are invited to come forward and light a candle in memory of that person.

And then a little later, we will receive Communion. We’ll invite you to come forward, to share the Communion bread and cup, and then, if you wish, to also receive a special blessing of healing and wholeness.

And so today in the remembrance of loved ones, in the breaking of bread, and in blessings for healing, we acknowledge the holy ground on which we stand and live, and we give voice to God’s compassionate presence with us.

In our story from Matthew’s gospel this morning, Jesus embodies God’s compassionate presence. He meets two blind men on the road. They call out to him, “Lord, have mercy on us... Let our eyes be opened!” And then Scripture says that Jesus was “moved with compassion.” That’s the English translation, of course.

The Greek word for compassion here is “*splagchnos*.” It’s used a few times in the Bible to describe Jesus’ reaction to people who are suffering. And *splagchnos* means what it sounds like, I guess. Literally, it means “gut.” In ancient Greek culture, your guts and intestines were believed to be the source of primal or even violent passion, so when the gospel says that Jesus was moved with “*splagchnos*,” we should read that Jesus had a physical, bodily reaction!

Deep in his gut, Jesus felt their pain and wanted it to end now. Jesus didn't look at the two blind men and think to himself, "Gosh, that's awful—I hope I can help." Rather, he was deeply, physically affected by their pain.

Maybe you know the feeling. That ache in the pit in your stomach that screams out for you to say something—to do something, anything, to relieve another's suffering. It might help to know that Jesus felt that too. And it might help to remember that God has true *splagchnos* for us—true compassion in our own suffering.

We're in the midst of our stewardship season, and I'm not going to say anything specific about stewardship today, except to say that this is *all about stewardship*: Our commitments to each other and this church—our passion for each other and this church.

How many times during the past year, as a family of faith, have we felt and reached out to each other with true compassion—with *splagchnos*? So many times. And that's a big part of what it means to be a church family—to be tied together in true compassion for each other...

I want to close with a story. Anne Lamott, a writer, once took her then two-year-old son up to Lake Tahoe where they stayed in a rented condominium by the lake. That area around Reno is such a hotbed of gambling, that all the rooms are equipped with those curtains and shades that block out every speck of light so you can stay up all night in the casinos and then sleep all morning.

One afternoon she put the baby to bed in his playpen in one of those rooms, in the pitch dark, and went to do some work. A few minutes later she heard her baby knocking on the door from inside the room, and she got up, knowing he'd crawled out of his playpen.

She went to put him down again, but when she got to the door, she found he'd locked it. He had somehow managed to push the little button on the doorknob. He was calling to her from inside of that dark room, "Mommy, Mommy," and Anne was saying to him, "Jiggle the door knob, darling," and of course he couldn't even see the knob to know what she was talking about.

After a moment, it became clear to him that his mother could not open the door--and panic set in. He began sobbing. So his mother ran around like crazy trying everything possible, like trying to get the door to work, calling the rental agency where she left a message, calling the manager where she left another message, and running back to check in with her son every minute or so. And there, in this dark, locked room was this terrified little child.

Finally she did the only thing she could, which was to reach down slide her fingers underneath the door, where there were a few centimeters of space. She kept telling him over and over to bend down and find her fingers. And somehow he did. So they stayed like that for a really long time—in touch, on the floor, him holding her fingers in the dark.

Sometimes, that's the only way God can reach us. Through the cracks in the darkness of our pain and fear, God finds a way to reach through, to be in touch.

Sometimes, that's the only way we can reach each other. Through the cracks in the darkness of grief and loss—when we need healing the most, we find ways to reach through, to be in touch—to be family together. May God bless us with true compassion for each other and for our world. Amen.