

A Hands-on Jesus

Mark's Gospel explores ways Jesus is tangible. Yes, Jesus is a powerful exorcist, recognized by demons. Yes, Jesus tells enigmatic parables. But Mark seems particularly fascinated by ways this same figure reaches out to touch ordinary people. In Mark, more than in any other gospel, Jesus reaches for and grasps women and men firmly to heal them by the power of God. This makes Jesus accessible and vulnerable. Is it not extraordinary that in John's gospel, the gospel that describes the incarnate Word, Jesus does not touch, grasp or hold anyone firmly? It is left to the author of 1 John 1 to write of "what was from the beginning," what was heard, seen, looked at and touched.

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Mark, Jesus grasps Simon Peter's mother in law by the hand, raising her up from a bed of fever. He then extends his hand (either in anger or compassion, the text is not clear) and touches a leper who requests healing. Sometime later, a woman in a state of impurity lays a hand on his garment and is healed. In the same episode, Jesus touches a corpse and raises a young girl thought to have died. But the actions and force with which he reaches out to heal are turned against him in the course of the gospel narrative. Those around Jesus— perhaps his family, perhaps his disciples— seek to detain him early in his ministry, thinking him unbalanced. His healing ability is inhibited by the skepticism of those in his hometown. A crowd presses against him. In the latter half of the gospel, opponents seize people Jesus knows: John the Baptist, the naked young man in the garden, and finally Jesus too. Until his arrest Jesus nonetheless continues to raise people up and heal them from sickness and death. After crucifixion, he is raised by God to new life.

Because Jesus' critics are bent on destroying him right from the beginning of his ministry, there's little time to grasp or apprehend him. But there is a glimpse of faith growing secretly one day as Jesus responds to a request from Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, that he lay hands on Jairus' dying daughter (5:22-34). A great crowd oppresses Jesus as he moves forward to respond to Jairus' request. Hiding in it is someone who reaches out to Jesus in faith. Mark structures the account of the woman who interrupts Jesus' move towards Jairus' daughter in such a way that the whole narrative focuses on her intent to touch Jesus. Bullet points in the translation below show a string of circumstantial participles indicating what the woman overcame to bring about her action in the main verb: "she touched his cloak."

A woman

- Being in a flow of blood twelve years
- And who had suffered much from many physicians
- And having spent all she had
- And having received no benefit but rather

- Having become worse,
- Hearing about Jesus
- Having come behind in the crowd,

Touched his cloak for she said, “If I touch just his cloak, I will be healed.”

The plight of the woman is pitiful. But her belief is firm that touching (and grasping firmly) with faith can lead to healing and understanding. We see the way she thinks: “Even if I just touch his clothes...” (5:28) And we hear the physical vindication of her faith: “she knew in her body that she had been healed” (5:29). As she touches Jesus for healing, she affects his physical self-awareness: “he knows the power has gone out of him” (5:30). Ignoring the disciples’ incredulity: “You see this crowd pressing against you,” Jesus “continues looking around to see the woman who had done this.” (5:32). His search for that woman, not just someone who has touched him, is ignored by all modern translations. Surely we should render it correctly. When each recognizes what the other knows, the woman tells Jesus “the whole truth.” Calling her “Daughter” and identifying her faith, Jesus names her healed and restored to the community.

Holding a leper by the hand, being touched by those with diseases (Mark 3:10; 6:54-6) or a woman in a flow of blood renders Jesus ritually impure. It explains why the woman comes behind him from the crowd, and why she falls at his feet publicly in fear and trembling after she has been healed; and why the leper asks for healing. Neither the woman nor the leper is observed by Mark to contaminate Jesus; instead Jesus heals them. Perhaps the healings that result overcomes the threat of ritual impurity: the healed woman is called a daughter of Israel and the healed leper shows himself to the priests so that he can rejoin the community. Could these two experiences enable Jesus to step on into the house of Jairus and risk corpse impurity by grasping the hand of a girl thought by many to have died?

Mark’s Jesus can heal the daughter of the Syrophenician woman from a distance but he heals people more frequently by touching, laying on of hands and holding them firmly. In describing an angry and compassionate Jesus; in showing Jesus being inhibited from healing by doubts of others and having others take healing from him, and in being tortured and crucified, Mark seems to be meditating on the wonder of Jesus’ physical body from which power seems to ebb and flow. This reflection is the miracle of a tiny window through which we can see and hear a human being mediating God’s healing power for life and being enacted upon for life after death.