

11.19.2023 Trinity 24 (St. Matthew 9:18-26)

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote about our need for personal intimacy with God, boldly claiming that “there is no other way to the happiness for which we were made.” Lewis then explained his statement with these words, “If you want to get warm, you must stand near the fire; if you want to be wet you must get into the water. If you want joy, power, peace, eternal life, you must get close to, or even into, the thing that has them.”

Personal intimacy with God is the abundant life for which we are all created. We are made to stand near the fire, we are made to get into the water, and in our Gospel lesson this morning, we find a powerful example of that truth. This morning we read about a woman who “*was diseased with an issue of blood twelve years, and came behind Him, and touched the hem of His garment: for she said within herself, If I may but touch His garment, I shall be whole. But Jesus turned Him about, and when He saw her, He said, Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole. And the woman was made whole from that hour*” (Matthew 9:20-22).

This woman had suffered from a terrible affliction for twelve years. St. Mark, in his account, tells us that she’d been treated by many physicians, “*and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard the reports about Jesus...*” (Mark 5:26-27) and on this day made up her mind to go near Him, to put out her hand, to reach out in faith and touch the hem of His garment, and in doing so, she was healed. This poor, sick woman who had searched so diligently, but could find no cure, is healed by Jesus. She is made “*whole*” by a touch - the touch of personal intimacy with God.

Throughout the Gospels we find examples of people, like this woman, either touching Jesus and being healed, or Jesus touching people in order to heal them. Our Lord touched those with leprosy, and made them clean (Luke 5:12-13). When Peter’s mother-in-law was sick with a fever, “*He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her*” (Mark 1:30-31). He touched the eyes of the blind, and they received their sight (Matthew 9:29-30). He touched the ears and the tongue of a man who couldn’t hear or speak, and he was healed (Mark 7:32-35), and at the end of the passage we

read today, Jesus took the daughter of a certain ruler by the hand, and raised her from the dead (Matthew 9:18-26).

In the first century our incarnate Lord clothed Himself in human flesh and used physical touch to make the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, and to raise the dead, but the greatest miracle in every one of these encounters with Christ was not found in physical healing. Instead, the greatest miracle was the encounter with Christ, the personal, intimate union with God that came from His physical touch. Lewis was correct: “There is no other way to the happiness for which we were made” than personal intimacy with God, the intimacy that comes from His physical touch, and what our Lord accomplished in the first century through the touch of His hand, He accomplishes still today through the Sacraments.

In the prayer book’s Exhortation, we read about “holy mysteries” that our Savior Christ instituted and ordained “as pledges of His love... to our great and endless comfort.” The Sacraments are these “holy mysteries,” and through them God uses physical matter, material that He created, to actually touch His people. A Sacrament is defined as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us.” The Sacraments are “ordained by Christ Himself,” and are not only a visible sign, the Church tells us that they are “the means by which we receive” spiritual grace, and a visible, material “pledge to assure us” that we have received such grace (BCP pg. 581).

Consider the way Christ physically touches those who seek Him through the Sacrament of Baptism. Our Lord uses matter, water that is poured over us, to actually touch the baptized, and this water (again, according to the Church’s definition) is “the means by which we receive” spiritual grace, and a visible, material “pledge to assure us” that we have in fact, in an objective sense, been touched by God. Consider the way Christ physically touches those who seek to be “made one body with Him” through the Sacrament of Holy Communion. At His Table, our Lord uses matter. The material signs that we offer to Him, as we pray in the liturgy, are the outward, material “gifts and creatures of bread and wine,” and the inward, spiritual grace we receive from Him, that substance of which we truly partake is His most blessed Body and Blood. We bring the symbol, bread and wine, and God uses the symbol to

touch us, and to provide us with the Substance - His Body and Blood.

Through these holy mysteries that we call Sacraments, God uses the material He created to physically touch His people in an outward way, to the end that He may communicate the everlasting comfort, healing, and life that comes only from an inward, spiritual grace. This is, in a sense, exactly what took place in our Gospel lesson. The desperate woman reached out to our Lord in faith. She touched the material, the hem of His garment, and was healed in both body and soul. Jesus literally said to her, "*Your faith has saved you*" (Matthew 9:22 LSV), and why, because clinging to the material of His garment in faith, united her at once to the heart of the One wearing the garment. This woman experienced personal intimacy with God through the matter He created.

Notice also, in her example, the necessity of faith as we seek such intimate, sacramental union with God. St. Mark writes about the crowd that surrounded Jesus on this day, telling us that when this one woman, in the midst of a great number of people, touched our Lord's garment, Jesus perceived "*in Himself that power had gone out from Him,*" and immediately He turned about in the crowd and said, "*Who touched My garments?*" To which the disciples replied, "*You see the crowd pressing around You, and yet You say, Who touched Me?*" (Mark 5:30-31). To His disciples the question was ridiculous, because as the crowd pressed in on Him, Jesus was certainly touched by many, but it was the touch of faith, the faith-filled touch of one woman that our Lord felt in unique way. Her touch was completely different than that of the crowd. Commenting on this passage, St. Augustine wrote, "Many throng Him, but only one touches Him."

Many throng Him, but only one touches Him - by faith. Augustine's statement reminds us that the Sacraments aren't a mechanical means of extending grace. The crowd pressed in on Him on every side, but only one touched Him. Only one was healed by Him. Only one communed with Him. As we approach the Lord's Table this morning, may we be mindful of her example, and the necessity of faith. May we, as the prayer book directs us, "feed on Him in our hearts by faith, with thanksgiving."

C.S. Lewis wrote about our need for personal intimacy with God, boldly

claiming that “there is no other way to the happiness for which we were made,” and through the example found in our Gospel lesson, we recognize that the personal intimacy for which we were made is offered to us through the Sacraments instituted by our Lord and God, Who, in the beginning created matter. Who, two-thousand years ago clothed Himself in matter, and Who, today, uses matter to touch His people, to heal our wounds, to communicate His love to our great and endless comfort.