

STOLEN TOUCH

We do not like to think about it very much, but it is true all the same: There is such a thing as “geographical evil.” That is, sometimes we are wrong just to be in some places. We like to think that it is a “free country” and we can go anywhere we like. That is perfectly true, as long as there are a number of places where we do not “like” to go. It is also important to be very clear about them. There are lots of places where it is not safe for us to go, and lots of places where, if we go there, just being there is wrong. I have heard the phrase in several contexts and even used it myself, but it rings with greatest clarity in my head in the voice of my father: “You had no business being there.” That did not mean I had “done” something wrong, or even that my father *suspected* that I had done something wrong. It meant I had no business being there. It was a wrong place. No good could come from being there, and harm could come from being there and was highly likely. It was a geographical sin.

It is no doubt difficult, for people raised in a culture which has trouble comprehending that there are places where we *are* supposed to be, to grasp the concept that there are places where we are *not* supposed to be. The trouble with precepts and principles that are true is that they operate whether we grasp them or not.

On occasion, it is the time of day that determines whether a place is okay or wrong. There are beaches where I came from that are perfectly lovely at low tide but which will kill you at high tide. Equally disconcerting is that not everyone has the same wrong places. In any hospital, doctors and nurses go into places where I am not supposed to be. Mormons go into a temple where I am not supposed to be. Technicians and scientists go into places at the Hanford Site where I am not supposed to be. All of us have places in our homes where, at certain times, most people are not supposed to be. Indeed, it can be an outrage and a crime called “breaking and entering.”

So, though many people hate the phrase, it is true nonetheless: We all need to “know our place.” And in fact, even if you have a poorly developed ethical code but have sense enough to keep out of the wrong places and be in some of the right places, you can live a pretty good life.

This woman who touched Jesus was in the wrong place. She had no business being there. We need to understand that or we cannot understand the story.

Back up with me for a minute. In the time of Jesus, there was no medical profession as we know it. The society's standard and major treatment for almost all disease was to quarantine. The major consideration was not to cure the individual, since nobody knew how to do that. The primary consideration was to keep disease from spreading. We have those concerns ourselves in special circumstances. It is nevertheless hard for us to imagine a time when, if anything went wrong with you, your primary responsibility was *not* to get well but to isolate. Better for the disease to take you out than to take out the whole village or the whole city. And since nobody knew what was dangerous – that is, deadly – and what was just a minor passing ailment, one treatment applied for nearly every disease: Isolate. Quarantine. Go apart, and if after a while you got better, then you could come back.

This woman had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. Our sympathy leaps toward her. What a cruel life. In any Bible Study group, we immediately try to figure out what could have caused such a condition. We want to name it. We want a diagnosis. If medical people are present, we get the names of possible conditions. They had no such options in her day. They did not know any of these names. To them, it was some kind of evil demon. All they did know was that blood was sacred, blood was life, and this woman was potentially dangerous. They did not know what was wrong but they did know it must not be allowed to spread. So she was ritually unclean. She was not supposed to touch anybody. Nobody was supposed to touch her. If anybody touched her, they were also ritually unclean and needed to isolate themselves until it was clear that they had not acquired the same condition. It was not nice but it was necessary.

So this woman HAD NO BUSINESS BEING THERE. And she knew it. She was endangering the whole crowd. *You* know that in fact it was quite safe for her to be there, but *they* did not know that, and *she* did not know that. This is a scandalous story, and it is important for us to realize that. Jesus' behavior teaches us far more if we know the setting.

After understanding, it is also possible to identify. Sometimes there are good places – places we long to be, places that represent laughter and joy and belonging – but somehow we feel like we cannot go there.

We are not sure it's anything we did wrong; it just wouldn't work. It is not the way our life is, we say. And deep inside, admitted or not, this attaches to some considerable sorrow or to some undefined shame. We will come back to that, but I mention it now because you will want to watch Jesus go for that.

That was the first point, as we try to get set for this story. This woman HAD NO BUSINESS BEING THERE. A second point, before we jump to the story, is this phrase Jesus uses with some frequency: "*Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.*"

I want to talk about that for just a minute because once we get into the story, we will not want to stop and fuss with it. Jesus does not use this phrase with every healing, not by a long shot. But He uses it frequently, and I am convinced that we usually miss His meaning entirely. In the popular mindset, it has come to be conceived that faith is some kind of religious commodity, and that if you work at it long enough and acquire enough of it, then you can do many things – like heal yourself. "*Your faith has healed you.*" And people think Jesus is saying, "It wasn't really me; you had it within you all along and I just touched it off. You really healed yourself with your faith." Many "New Age" teachers use such passages to turn attention away from Jesus and put the emphasis on our own inner spiritual prowess. Of course, you are welcome to follow them if you wish, but not if I can prevent it. (I have nothing against them, it's just that you can do a lot better.)

It is, first of all, obvious that these people in the Bible are not healing themselves. They are stuck until Jesus comes along. And *Jesus* heals them. They do not heal themselves. I sincerely hope that we will look to Jesus more and more, and to our own spiritual prowess less and less. So what does this phrase – "your faith has healed you" – imply?

We are in the eighth chapter of Luke's Gospel. In the seventh chapter, we get the story of Jesus' dealings with a Centurion at Capernaum. That story gives us our clearest picture of Jesus' concept of faith. (In other words, Luke has a right to expect us to understand the eighth chapter because we have just read the seventh.) The Centurion knows his own authority in military matters, and he recognizes Jesus' authority in far higher affairs. Jesus is astonished at the Centurion's understanding, and He says to His followers (that's us): "*I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.*" We know that for Jesus, "faith" means the recognition of authority. Best synonym: Trust. We trust those in

authority. Hopefully we learn to discern true authority. Abraham, the Father of Faith, *trusted* God to fulfill the Promise. That is why he is called the Father of Faith. We are forever making the simple complex and the complex simple. We try to define mystery – a contradiction in terms – and then make something simple, like faith, all complicated. Faith is not about giving intellectual acquiescence to various theories or creeds. FAITH IS RECOGNIZING AND TRUSTING AUTHORITY. Faith is not about *what* you believe, it is about *whom* you trust.

It is helpful to remember, then, that there is no such thing as “faith” all by itself. There is only “faith in” something or someone. Most of us have come to this realization, but our society uses the word in such a crazy fashion that we need to remind ourselves from time to time. Faith is the recognition of authority, and so the emphasis can never be on faith itself, but rather on what we put our faith IN. We have faith *in* money, or *in* mommy, or *in* ourselves. We put a certain amount of minor faith in many things, and appropriately so. But whenever we put strong faith in anything except God, it is idolatry. And of course, that keeps happening all the time, with disastrous results. Ideally we put all serious faith in God – that is, we recognize God’s authority because God is the only Author. All authority that does not come from the Author is false. We put our trust in God. We put our trust in Jesus to reconcile us to God. We have come to believe that God sent Jesus Christ as God’s way of self-revealing – of making himself known to us.

So Jesus says to this woman: “Daughter, your trust in my authority has healed you.” Or, “Daughter, your confidence in God’s power working through me has healed you.” Jesus is not minimizing His own role. He is saying to the woman, and to anyone standing around who wants to pay attention: “Your recognition of my authority makes it possible for me to accomplish God’s will for you.” Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.

Now to the story. The woman has no business being here, according to all Jewish custom and law. But the woman trusts Jesus’ authority. How much she had thought this situation through, we do not know. Whether it was impulse as the crowd came by, or a plan she had worked on for months, we do not know. What we do know is that she trusts Jesus’ power, and despite all her feelings about her condition and what that means in her society, she decides to *steal* some of His power for herself. She is desperate. Funny how *desperate* often makes big points with God.

A very remarkable moment ensues. She touches the fringe (tassel) on the end of the square garment thrown over Jesus' left shoulder and hanging down to about His waist in back. Simple. Here is a woman who has no business being in this crowd. *She is not supposed to touch anybody.* So what does she do? She reaches out and touches Jesus. She is going to risk contaminating Him – *on purpose!* Her touch, by all understanding, will make Jesus unclean. Unless, of course, He is too strong for that. Her faith means she does not think it is possible for her to hurt Him in this way. Not scientifically so much as poetically (spiritually), she trusts that His power will heal the unclean touch and, if she's lucky, the kickback might help her. She doesn't think He will even notice. The story says the flow of blood stopped the instant she touched Him. A stolen touch is still a touch – contact. Contact with the power.

But Jesus stops. He turns and starts asking, "Who touched me?" Peter, the representative of us all, thinks Jesus is a little slow and a little stupid, and that He doesn't catch on to these mundane things very quickly. So Peter begins to explain about the press of the crowd. Jesus insists that He felt power go out from Him. You are not to imagine, as some do, that His power has been depleted or that He is complaining. He simply knows it has been used.

The woman had doubtless shrunk back as He stopped and turned. But there are relatively few people in that first ring around Him. And as He searches their faces, her courage fails. She knows He will be able to recognize her. Then He looks at her, and she knows He knows. The story says: "*Seeing that she was detected,*" she comes forward trembling and falls at His feet. Why is she trembling? Why is she not shouting and singing praises? She just got healed! It is because she knows it was a stolen touch – she had no right – she had no business even being there. Suddenly the power that healed her is starting to scare her. Are you in this story at all yet?

First question: Why is Jesus determined to humiliate her? We have reason to believe that Jesus is pretty sharp, pretty quick. He sees into people and situations with astonishing accuracy and depth wherever He goes. He must have known how embarrassing this was and how bad it would make her look in the eyes of the people. He had already healed her. Why not leave well enough alone? Why call her out in front of everybody? Why must He now be so stuffy about such a desperate theft? Why care about the rules at a time like this? Everything in me shouts that it is a

time for gentleness, kindness, compassion, protection. Jesus should be cloaking it in secrecy. I do not like what He is doing to her. Oh wait ... wait! I think I could have done this better?!

But of course, it is not “well enough” and so Jesus will not leave it alone. We always want it to be: “Hey Jesus, heal me physically; I can take care of the rest myself.” And Jesus ever replies, one way or another: “If you cannot even take care of the physical, how can you possibly deal with the really important things?”

The blood has stopped but this woman has been through Hell, and she is wounded on many levels. It is not “well enough.” So Jesus appears to be cruel, at first, because He is after so much more.

Her embarrassment will miss it at first, but Jesus is healing her communally too. Before all the crowd, she is introduced as healed. The secret is over. She will never need to slink or sneak about anymore. Her self-image is being healed also. For twelve years, she had been ashamed to be among the society of others. Why shame? What wrong had she done? None. Yet the experience of being unacceptable does that to us – makes us feel as if we have no worth, as if we have done something wrong, though we do not know what. Sometimes we even start to invent things we might have done to deserve our shame and our rejection.

But this woman is called forth (dubious favor at first) to explain to the entire crowd what she has done and what has happened. It is confession and thanksgiving – cleansing through sharing and proclaiming. And Jesus is there, still in charge, though saying little. Jesus’ presence guarantees her acceptance by the whole crowd – acceptance and welcome, after all those years of isolation.

The nightmare is over. She is healed physically, communally, emotionally (self-worth). She is also healed spiritually – in the confession and the giving of thanks. It is all intertwined in this story, which is why the story is so beautiful and satisfying. And then Jesus does speak again. He calls her “daughter” – reassures her – grants her peace. And in front of all the people. “You are back. You are whole. Welcome!”

Why retell this story? It is my own deep conviction that nobody comes to Jesus whole and healthy. If it is true, as I have mentioned before, that in Christ’s army, only the wounded soldiers can fight, then

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it is also true that we must report first for healing, and only after that for duty. It is not true that humans are crass and uncaring. Most of us want very much to be useful, to be of service, to be helpful to others. But today our churches are full of people who have reported for duty without wanting to be a “bother” to God by asking for healing. The problem is, if we start serving before we ourselves are healed, then even if we make a lot of noise, we do not do very much good.

And so, if we have not already done so, I suggest that we present ourselves to Christ for healing. As the story reveals, that takes a lot of moxie. Why would Jesus do us such a favor? What if we get our hopes up and then get rejected? The story comes to our aid: We must come to confidence and trust in Jesus’ authority and power. He has it. We have only to recognize it – and trust it.

The story also reveals that our healing must come on many levels. Always what we want healed is connected to things we do not want healed or think we do not *need* to have healed. Touching Jesus will never let us be selective according to our own ideas of what the result should be. He will always go for the shame and the isolation and the core identity as well. We know He will. We have watched Him often enough. Any touch is always more than we bargain for.

Finally, I am directed to say, to a few of you sitting here today: STEAL IT! For God’s sake, STEAL IT! Some of you are never going to get it any other way.