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Luke 8:42b-48, ESV

As Jesus went, the people pressed around him. ⁴³ And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and though she had spent all her living on physicians, she could not be healed by anyone. ⁴⁴ She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, and immediately her discharge of blood ceased. ⁴⁵ And Jesus said, "Who was it that touched me?" When all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the crowds surround you and are pressing in on you!" ⁴⁶ But Jesus said, "Someone touched me, for I perceive that power has gone out from me." ⁴⁷ And when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before him declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. ⁴⁸ And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

Touching Jesus.

There are a number of homeless people living on the streets in Boulder. They come to Boulder because the streets are safe, there is a shelter in town, and law enforcement is gentle with them. Some of them are mentally ill and suffer from schizophrenia or severe depression or personality disorders. Some of them have suffered calamities in their lives, like losing a job and not being able to find a new one. Some of them work, even full time, at a minimum wage job, but cannot afford an apartment. And some of them simply want to live on the street and do not want the constraints of having a job and a home. Homeless people almost

never have any form of health insurance, and so they usually wait until there is an extreme crisis before getting medical care. They then head for the emergency room, often brought in by police and EMTs. I see them frequently at the hospital, having toes and fingers and sometimes legs amputated because of frostbite, or in alcohol or drug withdrawal, or in the later stages of serious illnesses like cancer or COPD. Most homeless people have been disowned by their families or haven't had contact with any family members in years or decades. Nurses do not like to see anyone die alone – and so I am sometimes called to sit with a dying homeless person. Since they have generally been rejected by society because they smell bad, are wearing rags, push their worldly belongings around in shopping carts, and are thought to be dangerous, they often react with surprise or deep gratitude when I touch them. This is something that you learn as a chaplain – to touch the people you care for.

Recently, there was a homeless man who suffered from some sort of seizure disorder who needed medical care. He made it on his own all the way to the main entrance to the hospital – not the emergency entrance – and then had a seizure just outside the main doors. A call came out on the hospital sound system, saying that an emergency team was needed in the main lobby. Chaplains answer these sorts of calls in case the person needs comforting or there is a

family member who is distraught. When this particular incident happened, the hospital was extremely busy. The emergency room was full, the ICU was full, and the hospital was short staffed. So, when I went to the lobby in response to this call, instead of finding a full medical team, I found just a single respiratory therapist. A doctor and a charge nurse from the ER arrived a couple of minutes later, but at first, it was the respiratory therapist who cared for the man. She made sure he was breathing. All I could do was sit on the floor, hold his hand, and assure him that he was going to be cared for. I have something very simple to share about this event – and so I will get back to this. Let’s call this homeless man who was having a seizure “Jackson”.

Our passage for today describes one of Jesus’ miracles. The story is told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We are looking at the Luke version. Here it is: *As Jesus went, the people pressed around him. ⁴³ There was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and though she had spent all her living on physicians, she could not be healed by anyone. ⁴⁴ She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, and immediately her discharge of blood ceased. ⁴⁵ And Jesus said, “Who was it that touched me?” When all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the crowds surround you and are pressing in on you!” ⁴⁶ But Jesus said, “Someone touched me, for I perceive that power has gone out from me.” ⁴⁷ And*

when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before him declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. ⁴⁸ *And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."* It's very obvious what is going on here – with the exception of one subtlety that has to do with the social environment in which this woman was living. This woman has had vaginal bleeding for twelve years. She has spent every penny she owns on doctors, but nothing has worked. Then she simply touches the fringe of Jesus' garment, and she is instantly healed. Jesus immediately responds by wanting to know who has just touched him. Peter explains that all kinds of people are touching him; they are pressing him on all sides because they want to be close to Jesus. But Jesus instinctively knows the difference between an accidental touch and a deliberate, faith-filled touch. The woman, who has tried to remain hidden, realizes that she has been noticed by Jesus and so she reluctantly identifies herself. Jesus explains that her faith has healed her: she knew that if she simply touched his clothing with her faith in her heart, a miracle would happen.

So, what's the subtlety in this story? Why was she reluctant to identify herself? In Jewish society at the time, a woman was considered unclean when she was menstruating and she would not be allowed around other people. Since

this woman had been bleeding for twelve years, she had been ostracized from society for twelve years. Jesus didn't just cure her medical problem: he allowed her to re-enter society and be accepted by her family and friends again. The point is that because of the rules of her society, she had spent a dozen years thinking of herself as being unworthy, of being sub-human. She had led a life of degradation. Jesus heals her in a truly profound fashion.

Let's get back to Jackson. He was having a lot of trouble talking because of his seizure. He was taken in a wheelchair to the emergency room. All of the rooms there were occupied. The ER was filled with loud voices, EMTs rolling patients in, and medical personnel rushing about. The only room that didn't have someone in it was a room reserved for violent or uncontrolled patients.

Sometimes these were people who had been brought in by the police because they had committed a crime while overdosed on drugs. They were often people living on the streets. The room had zero furniture in it so that nothing could be picked up and weaponized. All that was in the room was a pad on the floor. The man was laid down on. I knelt down next to him and explained that he wasn't in this room because he had done anything wrong. The ER was full, I told him, and there was no place else to put him. He nodded and thanked me. I waited with Jackson for just a couple of minutes while a medical team got him situated and

began to treat him for his seizure. I told him that I had to go, that there was a patient in the ICU that I had to see. Jackson, who was wearing ragged clothes that were much too warm for the climate and who had matted hair, reached out and grabbed my arm. In his barely audible voice, he said: “Thank you for touching me.”

Most of us live like the crowd that gathered around Jesus. If we could go back in time and walk with Jesus, we would willingly join in with the throng of people desperately trying to get near him. We would jostle him as he struggles to walk by and go about his business. We do that now in our lives. We come to church. But we’re just brushing up against God, almost by accident. We’re here in this sanctuary hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus, and as we do so, we inadvertently shove ourselves up against him. Peter is here, too, acting as a bodyguard and chaperone, helping Jesus push his way through the crowd.

But we should be acting more deliberately. We shouldn’t settle for being in a crowd that is swarming around Jesus. It’s not necessary to stick our hands out and get Jesus’ full attention. We don’t have to drag him aside and sit him down in a La-Z-Boy chair and make him talk to us one on one. Our contact with Jesus, with God, can be very subtle, very simple, very quick. But it must be deliberate. It

must be goal oriented. It must be intentional. We can simply touch the fringe of his garment. But we must do so in a firm desire to make contact with our creator.

One more thing. This “fringe” that the woman touched, what was it? The Greek word in the Bible is “kraspedou”. It means fringe or border or tassel. Most likely it refers to the trim that Jews of the day put on their clothing. It was religious in nature and served as a constant reminder of their dependence on and unwavering faith in God. That is what this bleeding woman touched. It was highly symbolic because when she touched this fringe, she was touching his essence as a person of faith. She was connecting with him in a seemingly minor fashion, with it only lasting for an instant. But it was not casual. It was a very deliberate attempt at connecting with Jesus the God. She didn’t just brush up against Jesus the man.

That is our goal. That’s why we are here. That’s why we pray, why we read the Bible, why we sometimes wear crosses around our necks. If you would like to know how to make your contact with God, with Jesus, more deliberate, more focused, if you want to know how to truly touch the fringe of God’s garment, here’s the secret. It’s very easy to do. That woman didn’t have to go through some monumental effort and get in Jesus’ face and then come up with some deep, complex, meaningful thing to say to him. She just reached through the

crowd and touched his “kraspedou”. You do this with your mind, of course, not your hand. The best thing is to do it over and over, many times during the day. Stop, ignore the world around you, and focus on the fringe of God’s garment. Then touch it. Make sure you are deliberate. Tell yourself that you value that constant, intermittent gift of being able to simply reach out and touch God. As you do it over and over, it will feel more real to you. It’s a great companion to praying. Praying takes time and a somewhat sustained focus. This is something that you can do throughout the day without any real time commitment. It can become a habit. It will serve as a reminder that you are indeed a believer all week long, not just on Sunday morning. Over time, you will develop a sort of bridge, a connection with God that is always open. You’ll find your frame of mind, your perspective on daily life changing. Combined with a disciplined approach to praying once a day, this deliberate touching of God’s fringe many times every day will bring you closer to your faith, to your God.

I dropped back in the ER to talk to Jackson one more time. He had been moved from the bare room to a regular room in the ER. My plan was to chat with him. He was over his seizure and had been successfully treated. He was alone in his ER room. But he was asleep and so there was no way I could talk to him. Chaplains do not wake people up. I did, however, stop and touch him one more

time. I put a hand on his forehead, and I thanked God for helping him get to the hospital on time. I also asked God to please lift Jackson up, both spiritually and physically, to bring him to a better place in life. I don't know what happened to Jackson, but I do know that when I touched him, I wasn't just helping him. I was helping myself. That's because there's another way of touching the fringe of Christ's garment. There is an alternative to stopping and quickly thinking about God, about touching God mentally. You can touch Jesus by touching someone who needs help, by touching them physically or with words, or by doing something for them. Please pray briefly with me.

God, we seek a closer relationship with you. We want to do more than brush up against you in a crowd. We want to connect with you personally, deliberately. We want to touch the fringe of your garment, and we want to do it over and over and over, throughout every day and throughout our lives. Please guide us and bless us as we do so. Amen.