



Following the WAY Jesus Follows – Touchpoint for June 7, 2023

TOUCH POINT

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26 (The Message) ⁹ Passing along, Jesus saw a man at his work collecting taxes. His name was Matthew. Jesus said, “Come along with me.” Matthew stood up and followed him.

¹⁰⁻¹¹ Later when Jesus was eating supper at Matthew’s house with his close followers, a lot of disreputable characters came and joined them. When the Pharisees saw him keeping this kind of company, they had a fit, and lit into Jesus’ followers. “What kind of example is this from your Teacher, acting cozy with crooks and misfits?” ¹²⁻¹³ Jesus, overhearing, shot back, “Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick? Go figure out what this Scripture means: ‘I’m after mercy, not religion.’ I’m here to invite outsiders, not coddle insiders.”

¹⁸⁻¹⁹ As he finished saying this, a local official appeared, bowed politely, and said, “My daughter has just now died. If you come and touch her, she will live.” Jesus got up and went with him, his disciples following along.

²⁰⁻²² Just then a woman who had hemorrhaged for twelve years slipped in from behind and lightly touched his robe. She was thinking to herself, “If I can just put a finger on his robe, I’ll get well.” Jesus turned—caught her at it. Then he reassured her: “Courage, daughter. You took a risk of faith, and now you’re well.” The woman was well from then on.

²³⁻²⁶ By now they had arrived at the house of the town official, and pushed their way through the gossips looking for a story and the neighbors bringing in casseroles. Jesus was abrupt: “Clear out! This girl isn’t dead. She’s sleeping.” They told him he didn’t know what he was talking about. But when Jesus had gotten rid of the crowd, he went in, took the girl’s hand, and pulled her to her feet—alive. The news was soon out, and traveled throughout the region.

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“Passing along, Jesus saw a man at his work collecting taxes. His name was Matthew. Jesus said, ‘Come along with me.’ Matthew stood up and followed him.”

The passage appears at first to be about following Jesus. And that’s what all the commentaries seemed to say. “This is about choosing to follow Jesus.” But when I look through the whole passage, it seems Jesus is doing most of the following. Jesus is being led.

Yes, Jesus calls Matthew to follow him, but then Jesus follows Matthew to his house to encounter and eat with other tax collectors and sinners.

In the second encounter of the woman with the blood flow – which makes her unclean, impure – Jesus does not reach out and touch her, she reaches out and touches him. He is not the one who reaches across the line that divides purity and impurity, rather, he is led across that line by this impure woman.

In the third encounter, Jesus is encouraged, led by the father to touch his daughter, “If you come and touch her, she will live.” Again this is an impure act. And Jesus follows him to his home. And follows his lead and touches her.

In each of these three cases, Jesus is being led across the line that divides purity and impurity.

So what do we do with a Jesus who can be led? I was always taught to believe Jesus came out of the womb knowing everything. Einstein's theory of relativity, the earth revolved around the sun, disease was the results of germs and viruses. You know, EVERYTHING! So why would he ever need to be led?

But as I get older, I think I like a Jesus who can be led. That is a Jesus I can follow. Following a Jesus who knows everything, and never is led, is not a Jesus I can relate to. But following someone who teaches me how to be led, rather than only leading me... that is something exciting. I suppose it's because the older I get, the less I know. Or at the very least, I am certain I am less certain as I age. (Is that an oxymoron?)

So to follow someone who teaches me how to be led, or teaches me how to be open to ways beyond my traditional ways and beliefs... that is energizing.

Is the Jesus WAY a way of being open? Is it a WAY of being led by Spirit, rather than standing one's ground in certitude and certainty? Is it a WAY of crossing all the lines of purity, tribalism, and duality – the either/or-ness that dominates our lives?

It would appear so from the radicalness of his statement in this passage, *“Those who are well don't need a physician, but those who are sick do; I have come to call not the righteous, but the sinners.”* Jesus seems to erase all the religious, holy, purity lines we have created.

Uh oh!!! I always thought that following Jesus would lead me to purity and make me righteous... but apparently, being on the side of Jesus puts me in touch with impurity and on the side of sinners, puts me in the midst of impurity and sinners.

Doesn't Jesus know that righteousness needs to avoid sinners? Purity needs to stay away from impurity! Righteousness and purity need to keep from contacting, touching, rubbing shoulders with sin and impurity!

But here is Jesus in our lesson for today, being touched by a woman with a blood issue for 12 years. And touching a dead girl at the suggestion and leading of her father – a girl who Mark's gospel describes as being 12 years old.

Now in the Bible, the number 12 is used to signify completion and perfection. There are 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 disciples and 12 apostles, and in the book of Revelation, the New Jerusalem has 12 gates guarded by 12 angels...

...And of course there are the 12 commandments. OK, just checking to see if you are still awake...

In the Bible, the number 12 signifies completeness and perfection. So the 12-year old girl is completely and perfectly dead, and the woman with a 12-year blood flow is completely and perfectly unclean in her blood issues.

And yet here is Jesus, touching and being touched by perfectly unclean people. And females at that. Matthew is doubling and tripling down on the uncleanliness issue from his culture's perspective. It seems that Jesus is unaware of the truth that when something clean and pure touches something unclean and impure... the clean becomes unclean, the pure becomes impure.

Isn't that one thing we are sure of? That when purity touches impurity, purity becomes impure? And when clean touches unclean, clean becomes unclean? Isn't that why we are taught to stay away from impurity and uncleanness? Avoid it at all costs???

Because when impurity touches purity, Impurity wins. And when uncleanness touches clean, Uncleanness defeats cleanliness.

"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." The accusation against Jesus is one we can all understand. How can one stay clean and pure when mingling with the unclean and impure? Guilt by association is still guilt.

But it seems that something is different about the kingdom of the Divine. For according to these stories we have today, the deep Mystery is that when purity touches impurity, Purity wins. And when uncleanness touches cleanliness, Cleanliness wins.

In the kingdom of God, purity and cleanliness appear to be contagious. Death, disease and sin do not. When impurity touches purity, it becomes pure. And when uncleanness is touched by cleanliness, it becomes clean.

Maybe being perfect doesn't mean achieving and maintaining perfection, but rather, being perfect means embracing imperfection, in others and ourselves.

What a radical departure that is from the way we think. We think our purity is dependent on staying away from, avoiding, building a wall between us and impurity. We think our purity is dependent on keeping impurity on the 'other side.'

But according to these stories today, if we have been touched with the purity of Christ... if we are clothed in the robes of righteousness and cleansed with the blood of the Lamb, as so many religious folks like to claim...

...Then there is only one place for us to go...

Into the world of the impure and unclean, into the brokenness, into the dis-ease of the world.

The Christian life then is not spent avoiding the pain and brokenness, the sin of the world. It is spent touching it and being touched by it.

If the brokenness of the world can overcome Divine healing, then the Divine is weak indeed. If the only way our faith can survive is by avoiding contact with the world, then our faith is weak indeed. Building walls, taking sides, creating exclusive communities of purity has nothing to do with the way of Jesus... the way of the Divine... the way of Mystery.

If we are, as some claim, a Christian nation based on Christian values, then what are we afraid of from the 'other'? Why are we afraid of touching and being touched by those who are different from us, those who are hurting and those we might consider unclean?

If our American Christian God is such an awesome and mighty God, what are we afraid of in the encounter with other people and cultures?

What a weak American Christianity we must be witnessing to if we simply act in fear and avoidance of the 'other.' If the values of our American Christianity can be lost in the encounter with other cultures, then our American Christian values were weak to begin with and not worth keeping. And we should pray for a death and resurrection of them.

Think of how much of American Christianity has focused on staying pure, maintaining righteousness, showing oneself as blameless?

HAH! What a joke. The only way I can stay pure, maintain righteousness and appear blameless, is by the constant touching and being touched by the Mystery who came to call the sinners, the unrighteous.

Purity and righteousness, if we want to use those words, are not things I possess. They are not things I own. They are not things I control. They are gifts... given to me by the One who continually reaches out and touches me and to whom I reach out my hands. Because in the Divine kingdom, when purity and impurity touch, purity prevails. The Divine prevails.

Just like in this meal...

In the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus reached out to the unclean Judas, the impure Peter, and to those who were soon to be stopped dead in their tracks this coming night... like the 12-year old girl in our passage.

He reached out and touched them... in bread and wine... with his body and blood.

And now, 'blood.' That which was seen in our Bible passage as a sign of uncleanness now becomes our source of life, forgiveness, and hope. Let that soak in!

Maybe Jesus doesn't have it backwards after all. Maybe it's we who are mistaken.

When life and death touch, Life wins!

When unclean blood touches the body and blood of Christ, or even his garment...

Healing wins.

Here at this table we hold out our hands, to touch and be touched by the one who comes to our side and brings healing and wholeness to us all.

Because when the Mystery touches our lives, the Mystery wins.

And that's pure grace... which is the one and only purity still worth talking about.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Song

Be Still

(London Fox Taizé Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God.

You Lord Are In This Place

(Keith Duke)

You Lord are in 1)...this place. 2)...my heart. 3)...my mind. 4)...my life.
Your presence fills it. Your presence is peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

In the Arms of God

(Tony Alonso, Marty Haugen, Michael Joncas)

Refrain: Come and rest in the arms of God. Leave your worry and fear. Make your home in the heart of God. God will dry every tear. For the burden you carry will fade within God's care.

Come and rest in the arms of God.

1) Gentle is God's way and humble is God's heart. God's love will light the way that leads to peace. Surely you shall see God's goodness and God's grace. Rest now in God's embrace.

Refrain

2) Do not be afraid. God heals the broken heart. Through grief and disbelief God still remains. God and God alone will be your souls true rest. Fall in the arms of God.

Refrain

3) You are not alone, for God is always near. Come place your doubt and fear within God's care. God will give you rest, and soothe your weary soul. Dwell in the heart of God.

Refrain

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer (Our Father)

(The Scottish Festival Singers)

Benediction

Sevenfold Amen

(The Emmanuel Quartet)

Amen.