

## Faith and the Body

Every so often, when I read a gospel story, there is one particular detail or one peculiar characteristic of the story that sort of reaches out and grabs me—one element of the story that shapes and focuses the way I understand the entire episode. That happened to me with today's gospel story as I read it over and prepared to preach on it: one little detail in the story of the woman who touched Jesus' robe jumped out and got me to see something in that story I'd never seen before.

Here's the detail: This miracle of Jesus healing the woman of her hemorrhage is the only story in all the gospels where Jesus heals someone without intending to do so. In every other healing story Jesus has some direct and deliberate interaction with the person being healed: he takes someone by the hand, or looks someone in the eye, or speaks a healing and restoring word—in last week's story Jesus even spoke a word of peace to the winds and the waves and they obeyed!—or Jesus says to someone "Your faith has made you well." In every other healing story there is a conscious and volitional address of Jesus to the other person. Now to be sure, Jesus does say "Your faith has made you well" to the woman in today's story, too; Jesus does interact with her in a conscious and intentional way. But what I find really intriguing is that that moment of intentional interaction comes only *after* the miracle happens. The miracle itself takes place without Jesus even knowing it: the woman comes up behind Jesus and touches his robe and is healed: and Jesus himself has to turn around and say "Who touched me?" before his will and his conscious awareness connect with what's going on. This story, and its parallels in Matthew and Luke, is the only incident in the gospels where Jesus heals someone *physically* before he's even *intellectually* aware of it.

In fact, beginning with this one detail, it soon becomes apparent that this entire story puts an unusual emphasis on faith as a phenomenon of the *body*. We usually think of faith as something of the intellect or something of the emotions: faith is the way we believe certain propositions about God and Jesus and the world, like the Nicene Creed; or faith is a quality of trust, an emotion in our relationship with God; or faith is an act of will, an act of committing ourselves to a holy way of life, like the Baptismal Covenant. But in this story faith is something that happens in the *body*.

It begins with the woman who has suffered with hemorrhages for twelve years. She's been to the doctors, she's tried to get help to figure out intellectually what's causing her suffering and to plan out intentionally a way to make it stop. Nothing has worked. But now, with Jesus, she feels something is different. "If I only touch the hem of his garment," she thinks, "I'll be healed." It's as if she can feel a different dynamic in Jesus, as if she perceives in him an abundance of life, a vitality, a vibrancy, a sheer *aliveness*, that is so intense it could literally leap from him to her, like an electric spark, if she just got close enough to touch him. She has faith in Jesus' ability to heal her—but that faith isn't something she has figured out in her head as much as it's something she feels as an energy in her body. And when she does get close enough, when she does touch Jesus' robe, she immediately feels *in her body* that she is healed. Her healing connection with Jesus goes well beyond her conscious knowledge, but is a way of knowing that is immediate, visceral, knowledge in her blood and her bones and every fiber of her being. The power of faith is a power she feels deeply through her very body.

Jesus feels it, too. When the woman touches his robe, Jesus is "immediately aware that power had gone forth from him," Jesus feels that electric spark jump to the woman, too. For Jesus too, as for the woman, perhaps even *more* than for the woman—for Jesus too faith is a physical, visceral thing, a trust in God's presence and commitment to God's mission that dwells not only in his conscious mind but is a dynamic energy in every moment of his life, in every cell of his being. The power of faith is something that Jesus, too, feels *in his body*.

Of course, Jesus doesn't just leave the experience there, on the physical level: he brings mind and intention and will to it, as well. When he feels the power go out of him, Jesus turns and asks who touched him, and the woman comes forward and looks Jesus in the face, not just sneaking up from behind, and she says what she has done, and Jesus says to her "Daughter, your faith has made you well." What begins in the body, Jesus completes in the mind. But when you put all the details together, what this story tells us is that faith—for the woman, for Jesus, and for us—faith is a power that works in our physical, visceral, bodily selves.

And that really shouldn't surprise us. We make the connection between faith and the body all the time, in every sacramental rite and ceremony. Sacraments always involve bodily things, along with all the words and prayers and texts and songs. In Baptism we speak the words of faith, and we also wash with water and anoint with oil, physical things that babies can *feel* long before they can say the words. In Eucharist we praise God and remember Jesus, and we also eat bread and drink wine, and the physical sensations of eating and drinking tell us something on a bodily level about God's sustaining grace for us; I knew a man once who said the sensation of warmth in his throat as he swallowed the communion wine was always for him a reminder of the warmth of God's love. Our sacramental worship makes us very well aware of the work of faith in the body.

Sometimes the power of faith in the body can be quite dramatic. Author Barbara Bradley Hagerty writes in her book *Fingerprints of God* about an experience she had while interviewing a young evangelical Christian woman named Kathy. Kathy had melanoma but was confident and hopeful because of her faith in Jesus; and that fascinated Hagerty, because Hagerty had always thought of God as a kind of creating, healing impersonal force, but had never really considered *Jesus* as a divine person who would take a personal interest in our personal lives. Hagerty writes:

“As we talked, the night darkened. The streetlamp next to our bench cast a circle around us, creating the eerie sense that we were actors in a spotlight on a stage. The temperature had dropped into the fifties. I was shivering but pinned to the spot, riveted by Kathy and her serene faith.

“My body responded before my mind, alerting me to some unseen change, a danger perhaps. I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand on end, and my heart started beating a little faster—as it is now, recalling the moment. Imperceptibly at first, the air around us thickened, and I wondered whether a clear, dense mist had rolled in from the ocean. The air grew warmer and heavier, as if someone had moved into the circle and was breathing on us. I glanced at Kathy. She had fallen silent in mid-sentence. Neither of us spoke. Gradually, and ever so gently, I was engulfed by a presence I could feel but not touch. I was paralyzed. I could manage only shallow breaths. After a minute, though it seemed longer, the presence melted away. We sat quietly, while I waited for the earth to steady itself. I was too spooked to speak, and yet I was exhilarated, as the first time I skied down an expert slope, terrified and oddly happy that I could not turn back. Those few moments, the time it takes to boil water for tea, reoriented my life. The episode left a mark on my psyche that I bear to this day.” That's what Barbara Bradley Hagerty says about her experience of faith as a power in her body.

And so that leaves a question for us: Like Hagerty, like the woman in the story, like Jesus himself, are there ways in which *we* can feel faith as a movement, as an energy, in our bodies? Are there times or places or activities in your life when you have been particularly physically aware of the presence of God, or the love of Christ, or the healing of the Holy Spirit? It happens for me sometimes when I'm out riding my bicycle—when my muscles seem to fall into a perfect rhythm, and I'm keeping up a good speed, and my heart rate and respiration are faster (but not *too* much faster!), and I feel so alive and so exhilarated—and it's like my body is trying to give me a glimpse of a little, just a *little*, of the joy God feels over the aliveness of God's creation. Or I knew someone once who said he felt the presence of Christ in a physical way when he was volunteering in a soup kitchen, a feeding program not unlike our Noon Lunch. He said he was handing out the trays of food when suddenly he felt Jesus standing right beside him, he felt Jesus' hand on his hand, guiding his hand as he gave out the trays. He said he'd never before felt so powerfully the *material* meaning of Jesus' command to love each other as he loves us. Or there was a woman I knew of who said she felt God's presence when she walked the labyrinth: she was concentrating on the simple physical act of walking with a slow measured cadence, concentrating on breathing in rhythm with her steps, when suddenly it was like everything came together, even the background noises from the street seemed to take their own proper place in her awareness, and she felt God all around her, she felt God in the muscles she walked with, she felt God in the space she walked through. And she said she knew right then that wherever she went from that moment on, long after she finished walking that labyrinth and went on to walk in other places, wherever she went she knew she would be walking in the light of God. The feeling of God in our bodies can come in all sorts of ways. How does it come for you? And how do you connect that physical experience with the words and beliefs and commitments of your faith?

Our gospel today is an invitation to us to feel faith as a power in our bodies—a power for healing, for praying, for ministry, for mission. Our Eucharist today gives us the opportunity to touch Jesus in bread and wine, in passing the peace and being in community. That one little detail makes everything else come alive. Amen.