

Last week I traveled to Roslyn Retreat Center in Richmond, Virginia to be part of the Board of Ordained Ministry Interviews. This is a time I look forward to every year as many of my colleagues and friends serve on the board with me. This is usually a time where we embrace, catch up, and pray with one another.

But this time was very different. Although there were a handful of people at Roslyn, the interviews and board time were all conducted virtually. While this is our present reality and necessary to keep us safe, it was a very different experience. Just like we have had to pivot to virtual worship during this season, there is something we are all missing.

And it made me think, what is the thing that we are missing the most as the body of Christ? I think we miss being able to embody the acts of worship in the presence of one another. We miss the ability to touch each other. To shake hands, or hug, to hold hands to pray together, to lay hands on one another and ask for God’s healing.

We are in a season where distance is saving us, but this is so countercultural to who we are as Christians. Touch has always been an important component of God’s healing and new life.

In the beginning of time God touched the dust of the earth and formed us. In Number 20:11, Moses touched a rock with his staff and water came out to provide life for God’s people. In Deuteronomy, farmers left their crops untouched so that those desperately in need of food could touch this gift and live. In 2 Kings 4 we see that touch has always been part of God’s healing ministry in the world. Elisha touched a young boy who had just died, and he came back to life.

Through the gospels we see that Jesus participated in a healing ministry of touch and that we were called to participate in this same powerful ministry. In our Gospel lesson from Mark 1. We see that Jesus laid his hands upon Simon Peter’s mother-in-law. Scripture tells us that he held her hand and, in that action, she was healed. Later in this same chapter, Jesus lays his hand upon a man with leprosy and he is immediately healed. Jesus’ touch is powerful and heals many people.

We see in the gospel of Luke that touching Jesus also brings healing. In Luke 8 we remember the story of the woman who had been ill for twelve years who was immediately healed after touching the hem of Jesus’ robe.

Later in Luke 8 we see that Jesus’ touch brought a young girl back to life from the dead. Scripture says, “But he took her by the hand and called out, ‘Child, get up!’” (Luke 8:54).

In the simple action of holding someone’s hand Jesus brings healing and life. In the simple action of laying one hand on someone, Jesus brings them back into the community after being an outcast. In simply touching a robe that is worn by Jesus, a woman’s life is forever changed, and she is healed. Jesus’ healing touch is still vital to us today.

So often, I find myself wishing that Jesus Christ was still here in the flesh on the earth and that he could come and place his hands on all those suffering in mind, body or spirit. That he could come and place his hands on all those with the corona virus. That we could walk up to Christ and touch him and immediately be healed.

Even though we cannot experience Christ in the flesh as those in the Bible, Christ is still offering us his healing touch today.

One thing the pandemic has taught us is that we must start doing things differently. Things that worked in the past are not working right now. Although we cannot embody the healing ministry of Christ through touch right now, even though we desperately want to, there is something we can do.

Through our Scripture from Mark 1, we see that Jesus did something very important during his many healings. He took time to be away and pray. This was a pattern in Jesus’ life. This is how he remained connected to God and was led by the Holy Spirit.

One thing we can continue to do during this pandemic is to pray mightily. To pray for Christ’s healing to be upon us. To pray for one another in our grief and our pain. To pray for a cure to the corona virus.

We are called to pray, and we are also called to remember that Christ’s healing touch is still available to us in other ways.

In the Old Testament Scripture of Isaiah 40, the prophet reminds us that God has always been God since the beginning of creation. So, if we look to creation, we see God’s handywork. When we look at God’s creation, we can experience healing.

In Rappahannock County we have been given a beautiful gift. There is not a day that goes by that we are not confronted with God’s amazing creation.

As Psalm 121:1-2 says: “I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.”

We may not be able to hold Christ’s hand or touch his hem, but we can look at the majesty of the beautiful mountains and listen to God’s living water soar in a babbling brook. God’s healing touch is all around us if we take the time to look for it.

In the same way, we are still called to be part of the healing touch of Jesus, even when we are unable to participate in a ministry of touch.

Instead of holding each other’s hands, we can hold each other in prayer. Instead of shaking each other’s hands, we can create a safe place to really share our hearts with one another. Instead of touching one another’s hands, we can touch one another’s souls.

We do this first by finding common ground. We participate in Christ’s healing touch when we are vulnerable with one another and share how we are really feeling. Whether it is tired, or scared, or sad, until we share the state of our souls with God and one another, we cannot begin to receive Christ’s healing ministry in our lives.

Recently, I was on a conference call with some other pastors in the Virginia Conference. It was a pilot program they were testing, and we were the guinea pigs. The point was to see if this new program on combatting anxiety would be helpful for our congregations. But what happened was profound. In one of the exercises, we shared what we were the most anxious about. As we did not all know each other I did not expect deep sharing.

And yet, person after person shared their deepest fears, anxieties, and struggles. We responded to each other and supported one another and realized that this pandemic has been traumatic for all of us. We participated in Christ’s ministry of touch that day, even through we were many miles apart.

We, too, are called to continue to participate in Christ’s ministry of touch, even when we cannot physically be together.

We do this at the table of grace, communion. Jesus’ healing ministry of touch extends to the communion table and into our homes today. When Jesus lifted the bread, he showed it was an extension of his body and what was about to happen,

that he would die for our sins. When Jesus lifted the cup, he showed it was a representation of his blood that would cover our sins.

As you hold the bread and juice today, in whatever forms they may be, I hope that in this moment, you feel the healing touch of Jesus. Communion is the way that Christ continues to bestow grace and healing upon our lives.

In the sacrament of communion, we repent, we are forgiven, and we are reconciled to God. In the sacrament of communion, we remember that Christ touched the bread and the cup, the nails, and the tree. We remember that in the sacrament of communion that Jesus’ touch is not limited to the bread and juice, but to our very souls’ because Christ is present with us.

In communion, we are commissioned to go out into the world and be part of Christ’s healing touch. How will you take on this challenge today?

Who will you pray for today? Whose heart and soul will you touch with God’s grace? How will you see people the way that Christ sees them?

As a church family, we are called to make an impact on one another’s lives and the lives of our community. We are still called to be the hands and feet of Christ and to make disciples, even when we can’t make plans.

So how is this possible? By God’s grace.

By God’s grace we continue to pray for healing, even when we can’t guarantee it. By God’s grace we offer healing to others through our words and actions, even when we can’t embrace. By God’s grace we look at creation and see God’s imprint.

The good news for our lives today is that Christ’s healing touch is still making a difference in the world today.

We enact this ministry of healing when we offer forgiveness instead of hatred. When we offer love instead of hostility, and peace instead of war. We enact Christ’s ministry of healing when we remember that we are not solely responsible for healing, and that God will act through us and in spite of us.

May we continue to participate in Christ’s ministry of healing touch in the world, even during this season. May we not be afraid to reach out to God and one another when we need healing and may we continue to pray for one another. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Resource

Leander Keck et al. The New Interpreter’s Biblical Commentary. Vol. VII. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2015.