

1. Stories of Jesus  
Sharing the Life-Giving Touch  
Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

About six years ago, I got a call from my District Superintendent. He said a woman felt that she had been called into the ministry, and she had requested that I be her mentor pastor as she explored this calling. I have done this for many people over the years and usually enjoy working with candidates for the ministry. So I said I would do it. I barely knew this woman. She had grown in the church in Brenham that I was serving. I knew her parents well. They were leaders in the church. But she was working in Houston, and I only saw her when she was visiting her parents.

When I met with her, I found that she was a very intelligent woman, who felt that God had called her to minister to those who felt uncomfortable in the traditional church. Although she had grown up in a very traditional church, she had never really felt comfortable in it herself, and in Houston she had found others like her--people who were Christians, but just didn't enjoy the traditional church. Now, I knew from studies and surveys and from my own discussions with people that she was onto something. There are a great many people in their thirties and forties who are devout Christians but don't enjoy the churches they grew up in and are looking for something different. If the United Methodist Church is to reach them, we will have to provide them something that meets their needs.

So, I encouraged this woman to follow her vision and her calling. I told her that I felt sure the District and Conference Boards of Ordained Ministry would understand her calling and would support her. I was wrong. The first time she went before the Conference Board of Ordained Ministry and explained her calling to them, their response was, "Why do you need to be an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church to do that? If you are not willing to serve in the traditional church, we will probably not approve you to continue in the process to ordination."

The woman was crushed. She was ready to quit then and there. But I and others from the church encouraged her not to give up. She went on to seminary and the next year when she went before the Board, she told them that although she felt called to serve in non-traditional settings, she would be willing to serve in the traditional churches. They approved her to continue.

She continued her studies in seminary, while serving in traditional churches. She graduated and spent three years on probation, continuing to serve in traditional churches. This year at Annual Conference she was ordained an Elder. I talked with her the day after she was ordained and asked where she would be serving. She said she had been appointed to start a non-traditional fellowship in the Houston area.

She will do it. She has the gifts and the commitment to do it. She will start a church which will be the pattern for churches that are very different than what we presently have. And she will reach some people who would not have been reached by the United Methodist Church without her.

But it would not have happened if I and others who knew her calling had not refused to give up on her. We gave her the support she needed to keep on going.

We were just following Jesus' example. Jesus never gave up on people.

As Jesus was busy ministering to people one day, the president of the local synagogue sent a message to Jesus for him to come and heal his very sick daughter. When Jesus arrived, the family and the neighbors had already begun preparing for her funeral. But Jesus refused to give up on her. He knew he had the power to raise the girl up. There was no need to lose hope. But no one else believed it. When he told them that she was just asleep and that he would awaken her, they laughed at him.

We give up on people too easily.

Jesus' ministry centered on people that most people had given up on. There was Matthew. He was a tax collector. People who were willing to work as tax collectors were considered so depraved by Jewish society that they were hopeless. Only the most hopeless people would be willing to make their living by taking money from their neighbors and giving it to the Roman heathens.

There was the woman with the issue of blood. For twelve years she had been going to doctors. They had given up on her. Her problem was beyond help. They said there was no hope for her.

But Jesus wouldn't give up on them. He saved them the same way he saved the daughter of the president of the synagogue.

Jesus put all the crowd of people out of the room and then he simply took her hand. That's the way Jesus usually raised people—simply by touch.

Touch is powerful. When I was with my children and grandchildren last week, I was sitting at the breakfast table talking with my son. His nine-month old daughter was in the other room playing with some toys. I was watching her. Suddenly, she put the toys down and crawled all the way across the room. She crawled up to my son's chair and pulled herself up to a standing position. Then she lifted up one hand to my son—not two. If she had lifted both hands, she would have been asking him to pick her up. She didn't need that much attention. She lifted one hand up to him, and the message was very clear. My son reached down and held her hand for a few moments. She smiled at him and then she dropped down and crawled back into the other room and continued playing. She was needing to be touched. That's all she needed—just to be touched.

That's all people needed from Jesus. They just needed a touch. There was a powerful message in Jesus' touch. The message was, "I haven't given up on you. I believe in you."

That was all they needed. The dead were brought back to life because Jesus refused to give up on them. The sick were brought back to health. Tax collectors and sinners were made clean and whole, because Jesus refused to give up on them.

Jesus' touch was powerful. And Jesus has passed that power on to us. We also have the power to touch people in the name of Christ. Our touch in the name of Christ says to them, "You can never be defeated, because Christ refuses to give up on you."

That touch has the power to raise people up and make them whole.

I once knew a man who was a leader in his church and his district up close to Carthage. I was talking to him one time and made the statement that I admired how faithful and dependable he was in his church work. He said, "I wasn't always this way,

you know.” I said that I assumed he had always been a church worker. He said, “Well, I’ve always been in church. But when I was a young man I worked hard and I played hard. I suspect there were a lot of folks in the church who were kind of embarrassed that I was a member of their church. One Saturday night I got in a fight. I don’t even remember what it was about. It’s one of those fights you get into when you’ve had too much to drink and you are in the wrong place. I got thrown in jail. I don’t know how, but the preacher heard about it, and he came to the jail to see me. I said, ‘Well, I suppose you want me to drop out of the church.’ He laughed and said, ‘No, not at all. You know that I’m a bird hunter. I tell ya’, when I’m shopping for a new puppy, I always pick out the most rambunctious one in the litter. They always take a little more training, but they almost always make the best hunters. I just believe you’re going to make a mighty fine church member one of these days.’ Then he shook my hand. I didn’t much care about being compared to a bird dog. But when he shook my hand, something happened. Something passed between us. I can’t explain it. But at that moment I knew my life had changed. I knew I was going to be a mighty fine church member. That handshake lifted me out of hole I had dug for myself. There was power in that handshake.”

That power came from the one who could heal the sick with a touch and raise the dead by taking a little girl’s hand.

Jesus never gives up on people. Why should he? He has the power to raise us up with just a touch.

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