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Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
Larkspur, California  
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Mark 5:24b-34  
"Your faith has made you well"

This last week I met Jill, a friend and member of a church I served some time ago in Marin. After the usual catching up we spoke more specifically about spiritual matters. In the course of the conversation I told her about the gospel text just read by Faith.

I said it was the gospel story for my sermon today. I like sharing my biblical text to outsiders, especially to homebound members who don't get to come to church, to involve them in conversation about the sermon. I pick up excellent ideas as I did with Jill.

Having recounted the passage to her I asked her what she thought Jesus meant when he told the woman in the story: "Your faith has made you well."

She said that she and Shasta, her Golden Retriever, are a certified team with the Marin Humane Society's SHARE (Special Human Animal Relationships) program. Shasta is a beautiful, intelligent, caring certified therapy dog. The two of them visit residents in The Redwoods, a community of seniors in Mill Valley.

Jill gave me permission to tell her story. She says she visits residents in the Personal Care Center and asks if they would like a visit with her and her dog, Shasta. Some people decline the visit. The ministry with those who accept is amazing.

Jill and Shasta enter a room and a resident might be physically turned in on himself or herself and downcast and when they encounter Shasta they light up and bloom in refreshing and healing ways.

I thought of my visits to residents in hospitals, care centers and retirement communities and although I don't have a dog my visits are meaningful. I thought about Shasta and mentioned to Jill that it must be wonderful to have a dog support her in her visits. She replied: "It's more like I support Shasta!"

Their encounters with residents at Redwoods are not that far from the woman's encounter with Jesus in the gospel story today.

The woman in the biblical story was pretty bent over and downcast from her 12 year attempt to seek healing for her ailment. She approached Jesus in the crowd which was a gutsy thing to do in those days since she was considered unclean. An unclean person was required to keep away from other human beings.

The woman throws convention to the wind and risks entry into the crowd and says if I only touch Jesus clothing I will be healed. A charge of healing energy passes through Jesus into the woman and she is healed there and then.

Jill says that Shasta's presence draws out the most wonderful stories from our elders and in many cases, re-awakens their younger and more vital spirits--at least while Shasta is present. "It is soul work to be able to facilitate these experiences for them," says Jill. Shasta snuggles up to residents and they hug her and stroke her and in doing so they experience transformation.

Another example of the healing power of dogs is their visits to the Napa County Juvenile Hall. Suellen has seen women from the SPCA take dogs into the Hall to visit teenagers inside. The teens are allowed to brush and groom the dogs, hug and touch them and sit alongside them – dogs of all sizes and shapes. The correctional officers remark that the energy in the rooms in the Hall and among the students themselves is more calm and peaceful after the visits by the dogs.

There is something mysterious in the unconditional love of Jill, Shasta and the Juvenile Hall women and dogs and the unconditional love and spiritual energy of Jesus whereby they become conduits for God's amazing energy of healing.

The woman in the biblical story, residents in Redwoods and youth in the juvenile hall have nothing to lose and everything to gain in their encounters with these agents of healing simply because they reach out and touch them.

Obviously, there's a lot more we can say about our encounters with Jesus. Whatever our condition, physical or psychological, we can reach out and touch Jesus. We have everything to gain and nothing to lose in doing so. We might not be healed in the manner spoken of in the biblical story but something for good always happens in the encounter.

How *do* we encounter Jesus? He is encountered when we pray to God in his name. We encounter him when we envision him as physically close as a patient would in a hospital bed. We see him standing next to our bed and experience his comforting, healing presence. Patients in Christian hospitals often see Jesus hanging from a cross on a crucifix on the wall. This indicates that he feels our pain. We encounter Jesus through the Body of Christ, the church. We are the body of Christ and we care and support each other through our prayers, cards and calls. I have people telling me almost weekly that they feel the caring and healing energy of the church praying for them in times of difficulty.

What about outcomes? First, we have nothing to lose. The woman in the story might have suffered another 12 years if she did not risk approaching Jesus. She had nothing to lose and instead gained everything. This falls under the category of, "Nothing venture nothing gain." It happens with Jill, Shasta, juvenile hall therapists and Jesus.

Second, we have everything to gain which means that we might experience exactly what we desired like the woman in the story. That's a miracle. Most likely we experience

healing in a myriad other ways: calming acceptance of an ailment, new perspective, peace, strength to carry on, and strength to continue our search for healing that follows paths beyond the medical model like the woman in the biblical story. We encounter Jesus in Holy Communion (today) where bread and wine (juice in our case) are symbols of Jesus nurturing and strengthening presence for us.

We can affirm faith in ways spoken of on the cover of the bulletin today. Faith is integral to life. I mentioned last week that I enjoy water from the tap because I have faith in the Marin Municipal Water District to supply fresh, clean, drinking water.

Imagine a country when you can't trust the local water suppliers, or the local government, or your neighbor, or the merchants outside a bribe. The woman in the gospel story lived in that world. Her medical condition and her poverty placed her on the fringes of society.

The only person she could turn to and trust was Jesus and far from condemning her like others would for touching his garments he welcomed her as daughter, blessed her, had mercy on her and acknowledged God's healing. He affirmed her faith.

When one becomes a member of a church one affirms faith in Jesus Christ and when we do so we have nothing to lose and everything to gain. This sermon is almost redundant because we know what it means when Jesus says: "Your faith has made you well."

In various ways, we've been where the woman in the story is and we know where to turn and it's a great blessing. Amen.