

***Touching Jesus***  
**Luke 8:43-48**  
**Sermon by Dan Schrock**  
**November 1, 2015**

*<sup>43</sup>Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. <sup>44</sup>She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. <sup>45</sup>Then Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" When all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you." <sup>46</sup>But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me." <sup>47</sup>When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. <sup>48</sup>He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace." (NRSV)*

Today we're continuing a series of six worship services on congregational practices that make Berkey the congregation it is. Two weeks ago we renewed our baptisms and last Sunday we focused on honoring each other. Today we turn to rituals in worship. Numerous times, the focus group that we gathered to talk about congregational practices said that doing rituals together in worship helps to make this congregation what it is.

So what is a ritual? In worship, a ritual is a ceremonial act where we try to make God's presence tangible. At Berkey we have lots of worship rituals, and a common feature in all of them is using our hands to touch respectfully in order to make God's presence tangible. I can think of nine rituals we use.

1. Our foundational ritual is baptism, which in the past we've often done at Martins' pond but have occasionally done here in this room. The person being baptized is always touched on the head, shoulders, or arms.
2. In parent-child dedications, the infant is held and blessed.
3. Once a year at either a Maundy Thursday or a Good Friday service, we wash each other's feet. Everyone who chooses to participate both touches someone else's feet and has their feet touched by someone else.
4. In communion, we break bread with our hands and use our hands to dip the bread into the cup.
5. In a healing service, someone anoints our forehead with oil.

6. In candle-lighting, we walk to the front and use our hands to light a candle as an act of prayer.
7. We lay our hands on people when we baptize new Christians, welcome new members, bless someone for a particular task such as Stephen ministry, or say goodbye to someone.
8. We also use our hands in various rituals that might involve stones, feathers, or paper leaves.
9. At the end of someone's life, we lay our hands on the casket of the dead person just before it is lowered into the ground. Alternatively, we use our hands to scatter the cremains or to bury those cremains in a particular spot.

We use our hands so frequently because Jesus also used his hands in the course of his ministry. This is especially clear in the gospel of Luke, where Jesus often touches other people. He stretches out his hand to heal a leper (5:13). At a funeral procession, he touches the stretcher carrying a dead young man and brings him back to life (7:14). Parents carried their infants to Jesus just so he could touch them (18:15). He touched a little bit of bread and fish and made it feed a crowd (9:10-17). Touch goes the other way too, when people reach out their hands to touch Jesus. During one incident in chapter 6, it seemed that everyone in the crowd was trying to touch him (v. 19). On another day when he was in the middle of a crowd, a particular woman—the one with a twelve-year hemorrhage—touched just the hem of his clothing, causing him to wonder where the surge of power went (8:44-47). Then there was the woman who bathed, kissed, and anointed Jesus' feet (7:36-39). And after the resurrection, Jesus invited others to touch his body to verify that it was real and human (24:39). In no small measure, the ministry of Jesus involved respectful touch.

You know what Jesus was trying to accomplish by all that touching, don't you? He was trying to make the presence of God tangible in people's lives. As God in human flesh, Jesus used respectful touch to connect God's presence with the human realities of hunger, illness, and death. A striking feature of his ministry is that Jesus very much portrayed

horizontal God, in contrast to the vertical God that was portrayed in the system of temple sacrifices. Jesus was never a big fan of the temple which worshipped a God who was thought to be far away and high up in heavens. For Jesus, God was much more immediate, always close at hand and available to any human person who wanted to connect. He portrayed an earthy God whose activity could be discerned in seeds and harvest, in yeast and bread, in lost coins and lost sheep, in bad weather on the lake and sunny picnics on the hillside. It's almost as if Jesus was trying to say: people, open your hands and eyes and ears and nostrils! You can find God in the air you breathe, in the food you grow, in the people you meet. God is always and everywhere in your face. At every moment of the day, God surrounds you. The only question is whether or not you are paying attention. In a sense, the ministry of Jesus brought Psalm 139:7-12 to life—that no matter where you go or what you do here on earth, God is always in that place.

Rituals in worship help us to connect with the God who is closer to us than our own fingertips. In a sense, our rituals extend the ministry of Jesus forward into our own time and place. And these rituals can be both powerful and meaningful. Donald Kraybill tells what happened to him during a Sunday morning ritual in his own congregation.

A recent Sunday worship service moved me to tears. Despite being an analytical sociologist committed to rational descriptions of human behavior, my eyes welled up. Our pastor invited parishioners desiring to be healed to come forward and be anointed with . . . oil on the forehead. As the congregation sang several verses of a hymn, about two dozen people came forward for the healing oil that was applied by two pastors and two deacons. They came for healing from anxiety before surgery, for forgiveness for broken relationships, for wholeness after divorce, for peace in the face of major decisions. There was no coercion, just a warm invitation and the melodious chords of a congregational hymn, yet they [the people] came. As they did, I sat and cried. And as I write these lines my eyes fill with tears again, evoked by the memories of that morning.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Donald B. Kraybill, "The Rite Stuff," *The Christian Century*, July 27, 2004, <http://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2004-07/rite-stuff>, accessed October 10, 2015.

Luke's magnificent story of the hemorrhaging woman describes us very well. Like her, one of our deepest desires and fondest hopes is merely to touch the fringe of Jesus' own reality. That's a pretty good description of what we're trying to do in the rituals of worship—to reach out in our need and human frailty in order to connect briefly with the life and love of Jesus.

We'd like to offer you the chance to seek healing through being anointed with oil. Any of you in this room is welcome to come: child, young person, or adult; female or male; Christian or agnostic; quizzical or confident. Come down either this aisle or this aisle, and then please return to your seat by an outside aisle. When you come, we'll anoint your forehead with oil, making the sign of the cross. As we do this, Jenny will lead us in singing. You can come for yourself, for someone else, or for some situation in the world.