

Here are a couple of things to note:

The location of your mailbox shows you how far away from your house you can be in a bathrobe before you start looking like a mental patient.

And the reason Mayberry was so peaceful and quiet was because nobody was married. Andy, Aunt Bea, Barney, Floyd, Howard, Goober, Gomer, Sam, Ernest T Bass, Helen, Thelma Lou, Clara and, of course, Opie were all single. The only married person was Otis, and he stayed drunk.

When Jesus walked this earth, people were healed and reconciled to God simply by touching Him or by being touched by Him. The motif of physical touch is everywhere present in Jesus' ministry. People are always trying to touch Him and He often cures people by touching them.

This text is a paradigm. It lays out a pattern. In it we see, in terms of the incarnation, how healing and reconciliation work in our world. Simply put, what it tells us is that, just like this woman, we will find healing and wholeness by touching the Body of Christ and, as members of the Body of Christ, we are called upon to dispense God's healing and wholeness by touching others. I have a couple of examples, for only 2 points. But don't get excited, your homiletic torture will be just as awful and long as usual.

### 1. Reconciliation and the Forgiveness of Sins

What is the fundamental sacrament of reconciliation? How are our sins to be forgiven us? Roman Catholics and Protestants have long argued over this, with Roman Catholics emphasizing the need to confess our sins, both in terms of genre and number, to a priest, and most Protestants suggesting that sincere contrition before God is sufficient. Is this a black and white issue? The complete answer is above my paygrade! BUT, there is truth on both sides; we're not narrow enough to believe that our Protestant brothers and sisters are all destined to miss heaven because they don't have the sacrament of confession! Both sides emphasize something very important, and both, at a more fundamental level, insist upon a more radical truth of the Incarnation – namely, that the primary sacrament of forgiveness is touching the hem of Jesus' garment, the Body of Christ, the Church, that is US. We have our sins forgiven in the same way as the woman in Mark's gospel stopped her hemorrhaging, through contact with Christ's body, that is, the Eucharist, and the community of the church.

How can touching the community be healing? Imagine this scenario: You are sitting one night with your family. You feel irritated, overtired, and under-appreciated. Something happens to push you beyond your patience threshold, and you suddenly lose your temper. You yell at everyone, tell them that they are selfish and stupid, throw your coffee cup across the room, and stomp out, violently slamming the door as a final statement. (Sounds like me on a good day!) Then you sit in your room, alienated. Slowly sanity and contrition overcome self-pity, but wounded pride and the rawness of what has just happened, prevent you from reentering the room and apologizing. Eventually, you fall asleep, leaving things in that unreconciled state. The next morning, now doubly contrite and somewhat sheepish, but still wounded in pride, you come to the table. Everyone is sitting there having breakfast. You pick up your coffee cup (which didn't break and which someone has washed and returned to its hook!), pour yourself some coffee, and without saying a word, sit down at the table – your contrition and your wounded pride showing in your every move. Your family is not stupid and neither are you. Everyone knows what this means. What is essential is being said, without words. You are touching the hem of the garment, you are making the basic move toward reconciliation, your

body and your actions are saying something more important than any words: "I want to be part of you again." At that moment, the hemorrhaging stops (even if only for that moment). If you dropped dead on the spot, you would die reconciled to your family.

But this is more than an analogy of how reconciliation works within the incarnation. It is the reality. What has just been described is, in its rawest, most stripped-down form, the sacrament of reconciliation. We have our sins forgiven by being in community with each other, at table with each other. Bluntly put, we will never go to hell as long as we are touching the community – touching it with sincerity and a modicum of contrition. To state things rather crassly for the sake of clarity, if I commit a serious sin on Saturday night and, whatever my physical state on Sunday morning, enter a church with some sincerity and contrition in my heart, I am forgiven my sin. I am touching the hem of Christ' garment.

St. Augustine, whose depth in understanding the Body of Christ has few rivals, in some of the homilies that he would deliver on Easter Sunday to newly baptized adults, would tell Christians that when they stood around an altar, as a community, and prayed the Lord's Prayer, any sins they had ever committed would be forgiven. (1)

He is right. Such is the power of the incarnation. Such is the power, and the responsibility, that God has given us in Christ. We can forgive each others' sins; not we, but the power of Christ within us. As Jesus Himself tells us: "In truth I tell you, whoever believes in me will perform the same works that I do myself, and will perform even greater works." (John 14:12)

## 2. BINDING AND LOOSING.

What do we do when those whom we love no longer share our faith, our deep values, and our morals?

Suppose, to use a very common example, as a parent you have lost your own children in terms of practicing our faith. Our children, our family members, no longer go to church, no longer pray, no longer observe the church's rules (especially as these pertain to sex and marriage, and view our own faith practice as either naivete or hypocrisy. We have argued with them, fought with them, and tried in every way to convince them, but to no avail. Eventually we arrived at the unhappy truce we live today; we practice and they don't. One of the deepest bonds of all between us has been broken. Moreover, we worry about them, living, at least so it seems, godless lives. What can we do?

Obviously we can continue to pray and live out our own life according to our convictions, hoping to challenge them with our life more than with our words. But we can do more. We can continue to love and forgive them and, insofar as they receive that love and forgiveness from us, they are receiving the love and forgiveness from God. We are part of the Body of Christ, and they are touching us. Within that incredible mystery of the incarnation, we are doing what Jesus asks of us when He says: "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven. (Matthew 16:19). And "whose sins you forgive they are forgiven; whose sins you retain, they are retained." (John 20:23) (2)

If we are a member of the Body of Christ, when we forgive someone, he or she is forgiven; if we hold someone in love, he or she is held to the Body of Christ. Hell is possible only when we have put ourselves totally out of the range of love and forgiveness, human love and forgiveness, when we have rendered ourselves incapable of being loved and forgiven in that we have actively rejected not so much explicitly religious and moral teaching and practice as the love of sincere humanity. To make this more concrete:

If a child or a brother or a sister or a friend of ours strays from the church in terms of faith practice and morality, as long as we continue to love that person, and hold them in union and forgiveness, they are touching the hem of the garment, they are held to the Body of Christ, and are forgiven by God, irrespective of their official external relationship to the church and Christian morality.

Our touch is Christ's touch. When we love someone, unless that someone actively rejects our love and forgiveness, they are sustained in salvation. And this is true even beyond death. If someone close to us dies in a state which, externally at least, has them at odds morally and practice-wise with the visible church, our love and forgiveness will continue to bind that person to the Body of Christ and continue to forgive that individual, even after death.

One of the great Christian apologists of all time, G.K. Chesterton, once wrote a little parable on this: "A man who was entirely careless of spiritual affairs died and went to hell. And he was much missed on earth by his old friends. His business agent went down to the gates of hell to see if there was any chance of bringing him back. But though he pleaded for the gates to be opened, the iron bars never yielded. His priest also went and argued: "he was not really a bad fellow, given time he would have matured. Let him out, please!" The gates remained stubbornly shut against all their voices. Finally, his mother came; she did not beg for his release. Quietly, and with a strange catch in her voice, she said to Satan: "let me in." Immediately the great doors swung open upon their hinges. For love goes down through the gates of hell and there redeems the dead." (3)

In the incarnation, God takes on human flesh in Jesus, in the Eucharist, and in all who are sincere in faith. The incredible power of grace and mercy that came into our world in Jesus is still, at least potentially so, in our world in us, the Body of Christ. What Jesus did, we can too; in fact, that is precisely what we are asked to do. Now some of you are sitting there objecting, saying "this can't be true!" "It's too good to be true!" "He's making it too easy for people!" "This has to be heresy!" Well, that's grace. It's always too good to be true. It's a gift that is always undeserved; a gift we could never get but have already been given. You can read the footnotes to this homily on the website next week if you doubt me. I didn't come up with this. It's the work of a formidable theologian, Ronald Rolheiser. So don't write to me this week complaining. Don't make God a stingy old miser with His goodness, mercy and grace. Which means He loves us. He simply LOVES us!

Which then challenges us to act like God. To act in love. So let us act in love, like Christ as the Body of Christ – bringing forgiveness and love to all our hurting world. Amen. (entire homily adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, THE HOLY LONGING, p. 85-90)

- 1 St. Augustine has this idea several times in some of his homilies on the Eucharist, e.g. see SERMO 272, IN DIE PENTECOSTES POSTREMUS (b) – AD INFANTES, DE SACRAMENTO, vol 38). Here, in explaining the order of the Eucharist, step by step, he says to the newly baptized: "Next the Lord's Prayer is said which you have already received and recited. Why is it said before receiving the body and blood of Christ? Because of our human fragility perhaps our minds imagined something which is not becoming, our eyes saw something which was not decent, our ears heard something exaggeratedly which was not fitting. If perhaps such things have been kept in because of temptation and the fragility of human life, *they are washed away by the Lord's Prayer at the moment we say 'Forgive us our trespasses so that we can safely approach the sacrament.'*" (Translation by Johannes van Bavel – emphasis Rolheiser).
- 2 John 20:23 Another note is in order here: It is easier to accept the fact that God can ratify our forgiveness of each other, but it is not so easy to accept that God would ratify our grudges and nonforgiveness. Can we hold someone in sin just as we can forgive him or her? The answer, obviously, is no. The logic of grace works only one way – it can be overly generous but it cannot, on that account,

be petty and arbitrary. God ratifies only what we do when we are acting as Jesus did. But this is a complex discussion and contains many rich minefields. For a fuller discussion, see Rolheiser, "Our Power to Bind and Loose," in WESTERN CATHOLIC REPORTER, May 13, 1955, and in CATHOLIC HERALD, April 23, 2996)

- 3 Slightly redacted from a piece by G.K. Chesterton, EVERLASTING MAN.

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