THE TOUCH

Matthew 17:1-9; Transfiguration Sunday, a
March 6, 2011
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Prayer: Dear God, we thank you for this time together, and grateful for this time of silence and stillness. Speak to us today. Come to us in word and sacrament. Startle us once again with your love, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Last week Margaret shared with you a little occupational secret: that even pastors with great faith have worries and anxieties. Allow me to let you in on another one: Sometimes people want to talk to you about God when you do not necessarily want to talk to them about God.

Here's a nightmare: I'm up in an airplane, thousands of feet above ground, nowhere to escape, and the person next to me discovers I am a minister. "So tell me," he says, "why should I believe in God?" But there is the other option, just as bad. The person next to me has just come back from an evangelistic crusade, sitting there with a great big Bible in her lap, and she wants to know if I have been really, truly, born again. And when. And where.

Those haven't happened to me, but awhile back I was at a sit down dinner. An elegant affair. I knew one of the people next to me, but didn't know the other. We were making small talk, the weather, sports, even a little politics, and as the salad plates are taken away and the entrees served, the man to my left said "Do you mind if I change the subject?"

"Not at all," I said.

"Well, good, because just recently I have been thinking that it makes no sense to believe in a personal God." Suddenly the salmon and rice pilaf didn't look quite as appetizing. "You see, Steve … your name is Steve, isn't it? … I accept the idea that there probably was a force behind the force that set off the big bang, but the idea of God having characteristics like a merciful heart, or God's becoming involved in human affairs … does that really make sense?"

To be honest, that actually led to a remarkably mutually respectful conversation. He talked about what he believed about God. I talked about what I believe about God. And after that I thought about how important it is for the church and for its ministers, wherever we are, to be genuinely respectful of the real questions that people are asking about God and what God has to do with us and our world. I think that the church and its ministers make a mistake when we assume that everybody has the answers to the basic theological questions already figured out. The basic ones — Is there a God? Is God for or against us? Is God far away or near? Who is Jesus Christ? People struggle with these questions. *Pastors* sometimes struggle with these questions. Whoever asks these deserve to have their questions taken seriously.

After all, we say we are "disciples of Jesus Christ." Did you know that the word "disciple" simply means "learner," or "one who is learning?" To be a disciple of Christ is to be someone who is learning, or wants to learn, who Jesus was and who he is for us and for our world today.

The central claim of the Christian faith is that in Jesus Christ God came near. Christ's giving of himself away for others was nothing less than God's giving God's own self away, surrendering to the forces of death, so that everlasting, abundant new life could be released upon the world.

Now that's a mouthful, and if you didn't get it all, don't feel bad about it. I don't always fully understand it all myself. And here's something that comforts me: the original disciples, those who knew him the best, didn't understand it either. They had a hard time comprehending that the great God who had created the heavens and the earth had chosen to live on earth with us. It was really only after he died and had been raised from the dead and felt his presence with them that they "got it."

So one day shortly after he had befuddled them by talking about how he was going to suffer and be killed, and rise again, and telling them to take up a cross and follow him, he felt he just needed to take some of them away and show them who he was and what was what. Matthew crisply and dramatically describes what happens: "Jesus led three of the disciples up a high mountain, and there he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared, signifying the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Then suddenly, a bright cloud overshadowed them and from the cloud a voice spoke saying, 'This is my Son, the Beloved … listen to what he has to say.'"

Here, more than anywhere else in his life, it became clear to his disciples: This is the one who made clear the true and essential nature of God.

I like the way Marcus Borg puts it: "Jesus discloses that at the center of everything is a reality that is in love with us, and who wills our well-being." Borg takes one more step: "Jesus counters the conventional wisdom's understanding of God as one who make demands on us and before whom we must cower and fear." Here is a compassionate God who wants to be close to us; who is the force of the transformation of all of human life.[1]

I didn't get into all of that at the dinner with the nice man. But I also realized then and now that I could never *prove* to him or to you or to anyone that at the center of things there is a reality that loves us and wishes us well. All I can say is that through the grace of God we can come to trust that God is real. That God is close. That God's wish for us is that we grow in faith and hope and love.

You can't argue a person into belief. I quit trying long ago. I wish my words could make it happen. I wish we could convince one another that God is real, was enfleshed in Jesus Christ. Theologian Dorothy Soelle speaks for me in her book *Theology for Skeptics* when she writes: "To speak about God — that is what I would like to do and where I always fail."[2] We come to know God and understand God not by proof or argument. We come to know God because God wishes to be known, as was so obvious that shining day on the Mount of Transfiguration.

You know, this text comes up every year the Sunday before Lent, which means I have preached on it around 30 years. But there is always something new. Anna Carter Florence, professor of preaching at Columbia Theological Seminary, walked through this passage with the officers this past January, asking us to pay attention to the verbs. "The verbs tell us who God is, and tell us who we are."

And so I did. The divine voice spoke, and the disciples "fall on their faces, overcome by fear." That's us, isn't it? Fear. It's what drives so much of our lives, so many of our decisions. Those verbs tell us who we are. They are paralyzed. They cannot move or think. But here is what I have always missed:

"And Jesus *came* and *touched* them, and said "Get up and do not be afraid." The voice, the cloud, the mystery, the majesty all boldly broadcasting that is was Almighty God they were dealing with, and Jesus walked over to them and touched them. The God who created the heavens and the earth was willing to come among us and touch us in the place of our deepest need.

"Is there anything that banishes human fear better than a simple human touch?" For John Calvin, this was God's great genius. He wrote "In Christ, God made himself little in order to accommodate himself to our capacity."

That's a long way from the distant, big-bang God isn't it, to the thought of God's eternal hand reaching out to touch our very human shoulders, so that we may know we are not alone?

Some of you might know the story that the surgeon/writer Richard Selzer described as he witnessed a remarkable sight one day in his work at a hospital. He writes:

"I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed…to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had cut the little nerve.

The young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private….

"Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks.

"Yes," I say, "it will. It is because the nerve was cut."

She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. "I like it," he says, "It is kind of cute."

He bends to kiss her crooked mouth. I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate her, to show her that their kiss still works … I hold my breath and let the wonder in."[3]

Don't get bogged down in the details of what actually happened that day on the mountain. Simply think of it as God's bending over to our brokenness, to our need, to our loneliness, to our fear, and saying in love, "Don't worry. No matter what your brokenness, no matter how lost you feel, I love you."

Amen.

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[1] Marcus Borg, Jesus: *A New Vision*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987.
[2] Dorothee Solle, *Theology for Skeptics*, Mowbray Press, 1995, p. 7.
[3] Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lesson: Notes on the Art of Surgery*, Simon and Schuster, 1974. Pp. 45-46.