

Touching the Hem of the Lord's Garment

A sermon for the Holy Supper by the Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, December 28th, 2014

“And when the men of [Gennesaret] recognized [Jesus] they sent out into all that surrounding region, brought to Him all who were sick, and begged Him that they might only touch the hem of His garment. And as many as touched it were made perfectly well” (Matthew 14:34-36).

Gennesaret was a city on the north-west shore of the Sea of Galilee on a major highway between Israel and Syria. It was part of a larger region that was called Galilee in New Testament times, but had belonged to the tribe of Naphtali in Old Testament times. It may not be precisely relevant, but Naphtali is a word that means “struggles” and it represents a state of temptations – or sometimes the peace that follows after temptations. And Galilee in general was a region of mixed cultures heavily influenced by the religions of the Greeks, Persians and others. So the town itself represents a place or state of mind where, you might say, anything goes.

It was roughly in this context – perhaps farther into the hill country of Nazareth, about 25 miles southwest of Gennesaret – that Jesus in another incident encountered Jairus, a ruler of the local synagogue, pleading for the life of his young daughter. And as the Lord set off to go with him, swarmed by His followers and the curious, a woman “came from behind and touched the hem of His garment, for she said to herself, ‘If only I may touch His garment, I shall be made well’” (Matt. 9:20-21), and immediately she was healed of some bleeding that had plagued her for twelve years (see Luke 8:43-48).

Luke recounts this incident in more detail than Matthew but the essential point is the same: a desperate woman came out of nowhere seeking only to touch the border of the Lord's clothing, and having healed her in that moment the Lord comforted her and declared that *her faith had made her well*.

This of course is just one of many miracles the Lord performed, after which He almost always said it was the peoples' faith that had made these things possible. But this one is notable for its emphasis on the hem of the Lord's garment. We know from the heavenly doctrines (and from common sense) that the hem or border of anything represents the outermost aspect of it, meaning the most external or natural degree of it, as in the series, end, cause and effect, will, understanding and action, or as we have seen here lately, the use for a building, the design of it, and the building itself. Everything, we read, follows in order from these internal, spiritual beginnings to external, natural results. But the real power, the real impact of the spiritual is in the natural.

So you can wish for all sorts of things, and you can think wonderful thoughts, but it's only when you express these things in actual words or deeds that they become meaningful and rewarding, especially for others besides yourself. It's one thing to dream, it's another thing to get up and do. It's one thing to have generous feelings toward someone; it's another to actually give her something that costs you time, effort or money.

And it's the same with the WORD. As we know it is inspired by infinite, Divine love and wisdom but this only becomes real and meaningful to us in its written form, especially in the literal sense of all those stories that bring the truth home to us in terms we can relate to and understand.

In the story from Matthew and Luke the woman of Galilee represents an affection or desire to be made well, that is, spiritually well. Her “flow of blood” represents a weakened spiritual state, blood being symbolic of the truth of faith that strengthens us and gives us spiritual life. The Lord’s garments represent the truths of His Word, and the *hem* of His garment represents the outermost expressions of that truth in its literal sense. Finally, the woman’s actual effort of making her way through the crowd to touch the Lord’s garment represents our own actual effort to get up and do something to connect with the Lord through the literal sense of the Word.

Today, as we wrap up another calendar year and start thinking about the next one; as we reflect on where we have come from and where we wish to go; as we consider the things that make for our spiritual well-being and recognize that we still have open wounds from the past that we have not been able yet to overcome, we have a new opportunity to get up and do something in hope and faith, knowing that the Lord can help us as no one else can, least of all ourselves from our own resources. Remember, the poor woman in the story “had spent all her livelihood on physicians and could not be healed by any” (Luke 8:43). A more literal translation of these words says “she had consumed her whole living” doing this, and still could not be cured.

So we also try and try, to the point where we feel consumed by some old issue, some old flow of energy that leaves us drained and weakened but somehow no better off.

But again, today, like the woman of Galilee, we of mixed motives and conflicting ideas about what might be best for us have a new opportunity to approach the Lord directly. For not only is He present with us in the living spirit of His Word (the spiritual sense revealed for the New Church), we know that this spirit flows right down into the letter and give it special power. And when we actually DO what the Lord teaches it is as if we were touching the hem of His garment, feeling that power and being healed.

Now there should be absolutely no feeling of compulsion or pressure for us to do this, any more than there was pressure or compulsion put on the woman of Galilee. In fact, if anything there is an opposite pressure, represented by the crowd of people preventing easy access to the Lord. The woman in the story had to make her way *through* that crowd, not unlike the men in Mark, chapter 2, who got around the crowd by letting their companion down *through the roof of a house* to get to the Lord, and it’s easy to imagine her being seen as presumptuous for doing so. No, there is no pressure to approach the Lord, only an opportunity that we may seize or not. But if we do, we should be prepared to give it some effort, meaning some real spiritual effort to overcome our own resistance, our own hesitation, our own sense of unworthiness or whatever it is among the crowd of thoughts that fill our minds, that might hold us back.

And of course you know where this is leading: you know that when the Lord celebrated His last Passover with His disciples, “He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, ‘Take this, and divide it among yourselves...’ and He took the bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is My body which is given for you; *do this in remembrance of Me.*’ Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you’” (Luke 22:17-20). So now we have this ritual, this activity we call the Holy Supper in which we have the opportunity to join a small crowd gathering around the symbolic presence of the Lord in His Word to touch, as it were, the hem of His garment by partaking of the same elements He offered at the Last Supper, *literally fulfilling His instruction*, allowing the power of that experience to heal us as nothing else can.

There's no magic in this. And there's no guarantee it will work just because we go through the motions. The Lord told the woman that her faith had saved her, not her actions, though her faith certainly was *expressed in her actions*. But really, that's the whole point. As we read,

“Each of the five external senses – touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight – has a correspondence with one of the internal senses.... [T]he sense of touch in general corresponds to the affection for good; the sense of taste to the affection for knowing; the sense of smell to the affection for perceiving; the sense of hearing to the affection for learning, and also to obedience; while the sense of sight corresponds to the affection for being intelligent and wise” (AC 4404, also CL 210).

Every natural sense is involved in the holy supper, and so all of our natural attention *can be* focused on something the Lord actually said and did in His effort to communicate with us. In the sacrament, then, like the woman of Galilee, or the man who was healed in the synagogue after he stretched out his “withered hand” toward the Lord (Matt. 12:13), we have an opportunity to reach out more explicitly toward Him than in any other way that is available to us today.

Yes, we may feel awkward or conspicuous, just as that woman did – or any of the others who came to Him so often broken and desperate, but there's no reason to be afraid. In fact, when that woman *was* afraid afterward the Lord made a point of calling her out, saying, “Daughter, be of good cheer” (or in a more literal translation, “Have confidence!”), and “go in peace.”

When the Lord Himself is present, offering His love and wisdom as it is here represented in the bread and wine of the sacrament, and when we recognize our need for His help, why would we hesitate? “This do,” He said, “in remembrance of Me.” And again, “Whoever confesses Me before men, him will I also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My father who is in heaven... He who finds his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for My sake will find it” (Matt. 10:32-33, 39). Our enemies really are those of our own household, that is, our own self-conscious concerns.

Of course the bread and wine themselves will not make this connection with the Lord (TCR 727:3), any more than the hem of the Lord's garment healed that woman. But the conviction, the love and faith that move a person to come forward and partake will. And one final note: we do not have this love and faith in or of ourselves. We get them from the Lord. As we read, “...The good of love, meant by the bread, and the truth of faith, meant by the wine... are the Lord's own;” they proceed and are communicated from Him alone (TCR 727:3). And they are communicated especially by the sense of touch (AC 10130), the one sense, by the way, that is common to all the other senses (DLW 365:5). So again, this is an opportunity to reach out, despite whatever qualms we may have, and “touch the hem” of the Lord's own garment, His own literal instruction to put ourselves in a position to receive what we all really want – the good, the pleasure, the nourishment of His love and the serenity of His wisdom.

Amen.

Lessons: Luke 8:40-56
 Arcana Caelestia #10130

