



Harm, Hope, and Healing: Peter Isely

Lecture Notes from a presentation by Peter Isely, SNAP National Board, at the Marquette University Law School's International Dialogue on the Clergy Sexual Abuse Scandal, Milwaukee WI, on April 4, 2011

Who touched me?

This is a dramatic question. We ask it when we are suddenly surprised and unexpectedly touched by someone and we do not know who it is. Although we know where we have been touched we do not know why we have been touched.

2,000 years ago Jesus asked this question. It is found in a remarkable story about him in the Gospel of Mark.

Because Jesus poses this question, it is no longer an ordinary question. It is a sacred question. It is God's own question.

In Mark's story, Jesus is on an urgent mission of healing, interestingly enough, of a child, who is a twelve year old girl. She is very sick. He is walking with the girl's father, who has sought Jesus out and begged for his help, even though his daughter's case seems hopeless. So, Jesus and the girl's father are rushing to her, moving very swiftly. A crowd of the curious and the bored are following them and surrounding Jesus. People are elbowing and jostling each other to get a good look. We have all been in these kinds of crowds. I remember, when visiting Tokyo, taking the subway for the first time. I was pushed with a crowd of passengers from the platform through the doors of the train by very polite subway workers holding massive shields.

Yet, with all this pushing and shoving, Jesus suddenly stops because he has felt someone touch him. Because he stops, the crowd stops. And his urgent mission of healing stops too. Jesus looks around him, to his left and right. He turns around. And then he asks his question.

It is the question I have asked my entire life since being sexually assaulted as a child by Fr. Gale Liefeld.

Over the next two days, it is this urgent question of touch and what it means that we must ask ourselves. For how we answer this question may well determine the destiny of our church. Let this question be our continual question. Let us be guided by the one who asked it.

Indeed, who—as it continues to be revealed in the ongoing trauma of sexual abuse by clergy and the cover up of these crimes by bishops, cardinals and popes—has touched the church of Jesus?

Because the touch of sexual violence and abuse has found such a comfortable and welcoming home in the Catholic priesthood for so long, the question of touch has become for many of us Catholics our single greatest crisis of faith.

And it should be.

The disciples who were with Jesus, according to the gospel account, found his question untimely and unwanted. After all, they were on an important assignment. They were amazed and astonished that Jesus was even asking such an absurd question. How, in such a crowd, could anyone possibly know who touched him, much less that he had been touched?

How often we survivors are told how untimely, unwanted, and impractical our question is concerning who touched us. How often we are told that it is interfering and even stopping the important and urgent work of the church.

Yet, Jesus, according to Mark, knew instantaneously that he had been touched, and upon being touched, he “immediately felt the power going out of him.” What’s even more amazing, Jesus had barely been touched, simply the hem of his robe barely grazed.

So who is this person who touched Jesus?

I cannot tell you her name. The gospel does not say. But it is a woman.

Because we do not know her name, I like to think of her as Jane Doe.

Why Jane Doe? Jane or John Doe, of course, is a generic stand in for an unknown person. In particular, it is a placeholder in a legal case. Many of the criminal and civil cases filed against abusive clergy and their bishops or religious order provincials are filed under Jane or John Doe to protect the identity of the victim.

So we have our 1st century Jane Doe.

According to the gospel account, the woman who touched Jesus, without his foreknowledge or his permission, had been afflicted for 12 years with interminable bleeding. Biblical scholars suggest that she was suffering from a severe disorder in her menstrual cycle, which would have also rendered her ritually unclean in the religious society of her time. The gospel tells us that she had spent all her money seeking a cure and “suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors.”

Can you imagine the level of isolation this woman in Mark 5 was experiencing? She was not allowed to touch anyone or anything for 12 years because whoever she touched would be considered unclean. If she had a husband, she could not have sexual intercourse, if she had children; she could not caress, love or mother them. She was relegated to a life without touch and affection.

I believe that the woman in the gospel story is, in fact, a survivor of sexual abuse.

And if we survivors of these crimes have, as they are called in my church, a “patron” saint, surely it is the nameless hero of this biblical story.

Someone touched her in a way that shattered her body and silenced her voice.

Indeed, sexual crime burrows itself into the mysterious border regions between the mind and the body, what Christians call the soul. Not surprisingly, menstruation is very commonly altered by this unique and terrible trauma, as are many basic and necessary bodily functions—sleep, memory, appetite. I do not believe there is a single survivor who has undergone the destitution of sexual assault, female or male, child or adult, who will not instantaneously identify with her seemingly hopeless quest to find a cure, as she did, for one's affliction. In fact, after seeing many doctors and specialists, she has gotten worse, according to the gospel account, not better; not uncommon outcome for survivors under the care of doctors and therapists.

Undoubtedly, like many victims, she has lost family and friends, is unable to work, cannot have close relationships, and suffers persistent and unwanted nightmares and flashbacks. No doubt she is at times suicidal. Most of all, we can surmise, she is unable to touch or be touched in any meaningful way by another human being.

But she persists, and risks reaching for the divine, because she knows that although her affliction is physical, its true source is spiritual.

In Christianity, God became fully a human being. Not partially or under a disguise. Through it, God falls into his own creation. Unlike other religions of the ancient world, God did not appear or assume the form of a human being. He became human. And he had a body just like yours and mine.

In becoming human, God forever changed the meaning of touch, turning every act of touch into an Act of Truth.

Touching, as the gospel shows us again and again, has both its divine and demonic manifestations. And this is especially and undeniably true when that touch is sexual.

It is an endless mystery that the shame the sex offender should logically and naturally feel within his own soul while violating the body of another is rarely if ever felt by him. Instead, the shame of this crime, that awful and crushing weight, is poured into the body of the victim. This is why the victim, not the offender, most often feels like the criminal and why it is so difficult for most survivors to come forward.

For the sexual offender always commits two crimes: first he steals the body and then he steals the voice.

You can hear the impact of this theft whenever we survivors talk about what has happened to us, in how we reach for words we know will be inadequate to the violation, in how our speech is so often arrested by moments of mute remembrance.

Needless to say, too often, when victims do speak up, with their halting and barely audible voices, voices struggling to be heard and restored, they are unwelcome and unwanted.

The perpetrator is almost always of greater social value than the victim. So it is the victim who will be charged, if not by words than by actions, with violating the peace and order of the church.

Indeed, there are so many psychological and social forces arrayed against a victim speaking, especially a child, that when it does occur it is almost always a miracle, a greater miracle one might say, than walking on water.

Catholics sometimes will say to me, often defiantly it seems to me: “This scandal has not made me lose my faith!” My reply to that is: “It is wonderful that you have succeeded where Christ failed.”

There is a famous book by the British philosopher Bertrand Russell called: “Why I am not a Christian.” Let me tell you why I am a Christian. It is because losing one’s faith is not a problem in Christianity. Christ, my brother, our brother, utterly and totally lost his faith. He cried his loss of faith on the cross. Every child abused by a priest makes this same cry.

Simone Weil, the great and challenging 20th century mystic once wrote: “At the bottom of the heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered, and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being.”

How I remember, as so many survivors do, while being molested by Fr. Liefeld, the crucifix on the wall of his room.

Saint Paul taught us that the greatest things in this universe are faith, hope and love. Faith is indeed great, but it is not the greatest thing. Hope is great. But it is not the greatest thing. Christ lost his faith and his hope. But not his love. Love is the greatest of all things.

And the crisis of sexual abuse by priests is—make no mistake about it—not really a crisis of faith and hope. It is a crisis of love.

God so ordered the world that he placed at the center of the human heart the free faculty of consent. Of consent to the love. Sexual abuse is a parody and mockery of that consent.

The Church believes that God created us so that we might long, through love, for the absolute good. This longing is sacred; only the divine can satisfy it. It forms a link between each person and God. This link exists in every human being, whatever their character, history or circumstances; it is the means by which the good descends into every human life.

But this good, which the Church holds as essential to human salvation, cannot enter a person without a free act of consent. The human consent to the divine initiative of love can never, under any circumstances, be coerced, manipulated or forced; it can never result from the operation of any kind of human or natural necessity whatsoever, physical, psychological or social.

I was taught as a small boy on my mother’s knee, as many of us were, the Lord’s Prayer. It begins, of course, with the phrase, “Our Father, who is in heaven.” God, Jesus instructs us, is absent from the earth. He is nowhere to be found here on earth, where gravity, not grace, as Weil says, so often reigns. So, the prayer implies, it is truly pointless to look for Him here.

When Jesus appeared to Mary and Mary Magdalene at the tomb they mistook him for the gardener. He said to them: “The one you are seeking for is not here.”

Maybe that is why God absurdly surrendered his eternal place of peace so he might touch and be touched by his creation. Maybe he paid this price so that he might join us in a never ending wonderment and sorrow at the Father's absence.

Our bodies are the site of a great drama where God and humanity meet, argue, pray. God brings gravity's opposite, which is grace. It is grace that fills the cursed body of the women in the gospel story and fires her with courage, boldness, and fearlessness, in spite of the self-blame, self-hatred and self-accusation that sexual affliction brings and seems to permanently establish in so many of us victims.

Grace plots to bring us close to the Jesus who lost his faith and hope in God. It is grace that moves from us, to him, and back again.

And when grace moves back and forth between the creation and the creator, for a moment, maybe for split second, the inexorable and seemingly unbreakable law of gravity is really and truly suspended. As Mark reports concerning our nameless hero, our Saint Jane Doe, when touching Jesus, the "terrible suffering was lifted from her body."

I want to welcome each and every one of you here today on behalf of the many survivors in our community and our archdiocese.

Whether we are inside or outside the church, whether we are male or female, adult or child, healed or broken, does not matter. What matters is that you have made a place for us, if only for a few days, that we might bear witness to the pain, power and promise of touch.