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Date: May 20, 2012
Sermon Title: Second Touch
Scripture: Mark 8:22-28
Pastor: Rev. Alida Ward

Last Friday I drove down to Philly to pick up my daughter Brigitta from college. Brigitta, as a lot of you know, is at Bryn Mawr College, which happens to be the school I went to. And she's decided to major in religion, which is what her mom majored in too. And as it's turned out, the professor with which she's working most closely is the same one I had some thirty years ago. All of which is very cool. So when I went down to pick her up last week, it seemed to me that what would be even cooler would be for Brigitta and me to go stop in on her professor, and all of us have a little visit together – Brigitta, her mother, and the great Professor McAdamsⁱ.

Now here was my hidden agenda. Thirty years ago, I was scared to death of Professor McAdams. I've since figured out that she was actually only 8 years older than I was at the time, but all your professors seem scary in college, and 30 sounds plenty old. I could barely breathe in her classes, let alone speak, let alone speak anything intelligent. Thirty years later, as a reasonably successful adult human being, I figured this was my chance to meet up with her on equal footing, engage – finally – in some shared intelligent religious conversation, and in the process perhaps impress my daughter by impressing her impressive professor.

The plan began to fall apart as soon as we walked into the building where her – our – professor's office was. Thirty years dropped away as nothing. I immediately felt my hands begin to sweat, my knees get a little wobbly. As we neared her office door, familiar waves of nausea began to pass over me. I was 21 again, heading to office hours with nothing between my ears except a great black hole of ignorance. Or so it felt. In we walked, Brigitta and I. And there she was, Professor McAdams. Dear God.

Now, I have to tell you, she was delightful, welcoming, eager to know what I'd been up to, peppering me with questions. *But* for every question she asked, all I could think was "oh my God, what's the right answer to this?" "What do you enjoy most about ministry?" she asked "Youth work," I said, "Wait, I mean, no, counseling – um, no, wait, I mean I like keeping up with my theology reading, lots of book reading– or, is that right, no really, I would say preaching." "Ah," she said, "and which Gospel is your favorite to preach on?" Brigitta frantically tried to signal the *right* answer to me. To no avail.

"Luke," I said, "The Gospel of Luke. Love that book. Preached on it more than any other." "Ah," my professor said. "I've always preferred the Gospel of Mark. There's so much there. So many wonderful preaching themes. Such a rich gospel."

All the way home to Connecticut, I said to Brigitta "*Mark*. Why couldn't I say Mark. Why couldn't I remember Mark??" "Mom," she said, "relax. You were – fine, really." "Tell you this," I said, "next time I preach, it's on Mark."

So here we are. Mark chapter 8. Because I still want to impress my professor. But there's another story behind this scripture for today, too. Ten years ago, on Father's Day, I told my dad that I had this idea, that in honor of him, I would preach on whatever his favorite bible passage happened to be. Mark, he said. Mark chapter 8.

Now my dad is one of the most faithful people I know, in addition to be one of the nuttiest, and funniest, and most compassionate. And it's that compassion, I think, that draws him to this story.

It's a tiny little story, all of six verses long. Goes like this: Passing through Bethsaida, on his way to somewhere more important, Jesus comes across a blind man. Actually, comes across the blind man's friends, who have dragged him out to meet Jesus, and who beg Jesus to touch and heal him. Jesus, the story says, takes the blind man by the hand and leads him down the road, out of the town, away from the crowds. Then he stops, spits on his hands and rubs the man's eyes. There's a pause while the man blinks and looks around. And then Jesus asks, "Can you see anything?" And here's where the story takes a funny little turn. "In all honesty?" replies the blind man. "No, not exactly. I mean, I do see people, but they look more like trees, walking." "Hmmm," says Jesus, or one imagines he says "Hmmm." And he touches the blind man again. A second touch. A second touch of his eyes, and *then*, it says, then, the world swam into focus and the blind man saw.

“I love this story,” says my Dad, “because that’s not what you expect is going to happen. You think one touch is going to do it, that *poof* the blind man will see. But instead it turns out he needs a little extra help. He needs that second touch. And Jesus is so gentle, so loving, so concerned. “Can you see yet?” he says. “No, not yet? Then here, let me do it again.” You get the feeling, said my Dad, that Jesus isn’t going to leave the scene until he’s sure, he’s *sure* that man is okay.”

I came across a story on the Internet the other day, about a woman I’d first heard of many years ago. Dr. Lillian Cingo of South Africa. She is famous for something that her South African countrymen came to call the Train of Hope, a train that for 18 years now has criss-crossed the nation, traveling from township to township from poverty to poverty. A train bearing doctors and their medicines; prosthetics, crutches, wheelchairs, and free eyeglasses for children who have never been able to see clearly. Dr. Cingo, a woman of indomitable spirit and inexhaustible energy, left her medical practice in the city to spend each day helping the blind to see. And I remember what she said when the TV interviewer asked her *why*. “Because I cannot imagine anything better,” she replied, “I cannot imagine anything better than being present for that moment when a child, for the first time, looks up at his mother and sees her looks up at his mother and sees not a blur, but her face, the face of his mother who loves him. There is nothing better than that moment.”ⁱⁱ

“Can you see now?” said Jesus to the blind man. “Can you see?” “It’s all still a blur,” said the man, maybe a little sheepishly. “The people look like trees to me.” “Here,” said Jesus, and touched him again. A second touch. “Now?” he asked. “Now I see,” said the man, and he looked intently, wonderingly, joyfully into the face of the one who loved him. Saw clearly the face of the one who loved him.

“It seems to me,” my dad likes to say, “it seems to me that this story is really all about us.” It seems to me that all of us, sometime or another, need a second touch. “How is it now?” Jesus says, “Can you see yet?” And we say, “not quite, yet. Things are still pretty fuzzy.” And so he stays with us until we see. A second touch. And maybe more.”

My dad’s right. And not just ‘cause he’s my dad. We do all need a second touch. And maybe again and again. When it comes to the life of faith, when it comes to being a faithful, believing person, don’t we all, often, need a second touch to make our faith alive and real and strong? It’s not that we don’t know

the gospel stories – from Luke or Mark. It's not that we don't come to church. It's not that we don't pray, at least as best we can. It's not that we don't believe.

But our faith can get pretty blurry sometimes, less in focus. Life can do that to us –hard things happen – to us or to the people we love. Mysteries unfold around us – the whys and 'how comes' and 'why would that happen?' And faith gets blurry. God's love -- hard to see sometimes, shadowy, uncertain, unclear. And in those times, in those shadowy times, blurry times, if we listen, if we listen, we can hear the voice of Jesus gently saying this to us. "Is it okay? Can you see anything?" says Jesus. "Can you see?" "Not really," is our answer. "Not so well, really," we admit. And that's when he offers a second touch. A second touch. To bring faith back into focus, to bring God back from the shadows. That's when Jesus is there to offer a second touch.

If we are honest with ourselves, the truth is that's why all of us have found our ways back to church. Because we're seeking that second touch. Somewhere along the way faith got fuzzy, something happened to make it less certain ... maybe just the questions that mount up as life unfolds, maybe just the slow drift away from church that happens to most people at some point , or maybe indeed some hard thing that happened. And faith is out of focus for us, way unclear. We seek a second touch, a second chance at healing, another try, And we come here. And maybe it's a third or fourth or fifth touch we seek, and that's okay too. As my dad put it: Jesus isn't going to leave the scene until he's sure, until he's sure the healing has happened. And that deal is offered to each one of us.

The way it comes to each of us is different, the way we experience that second touch. It may simply be the slow release of doubt. Maybe a sweet sense of peace as anxiety ebbs away. Maybe the relief of finally letting God take away the hurt, carry the burden for you All of those are what a second touch feels like. And sometimes, sometimes, the second touch comes in a real 'aha'moment.

I came across a story about a second touch this week, an 'aha' moment, that moved me so deeply I shared it with our high school fellowship. It's entitled The Cab Ride I'll Never Forget – and I won't do it justice, so look it up online when you get home. But here's how it goes – condensed version:

Twenty years ago, I was making ends meet as a cab driver. One warm August night, I responded to a call that came in at 2:30 a.m. I assumed I was being sent to pick up some late night partiers who shouldn't be driving. But when I arrived

at the address, the building was dark except for a single light in a ground-floor window. I walked to the door and knocked. "Just a minute," answered a frail and elderly voice. After a long pause, the door opened. A small woman somewhere in her 80s stood before me. She was wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat with a veil pinned on it, like you might see in a 1940s movie. By her side was a small nylon suitcase.

I took the suitcase to the cab, then returned to assist the woman. She took my arm, and we walked slowly toward the curb. When we got in the cab, she gave me an address, then asked, "Could you drive through downtown?" "It's not the shortest way," I answered. "Oh, I don't mind," she said. "I'm in no hurry. I'm on my way to a hospice." I looked in the rearview mirror. Her eyes were glistening. "I don't have any family left," she said. "The doctor says I should go there. He says I don't have very long." I quietly reached over and shut off the meter. "What route would you like me to go?" I asked. For the next two hours we drove through the city. She showed me the building where she had once worked as an elevator operator. We drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived when they had first been married. She had me pull up in front of a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a girl.

As the first hint of sun was creasing the horizon, she suddenly said, "I'm tired. Let's go now." We drove in silence to the address she had given me. Two orderlies came out to the cab as soon as we pulled up, and helped her out. I opened the trunk and took the small suitcase up to the door. The woman had already been seated in a wheelchair. "How much do I owe you?" she asked, reaching into her purse. "Nothing," I said. "You have to make a living," she answered. "There are other passengers for that," I responded.

And almost without thinking, I bent and gave her a hug. She held on to me tightly. "You gave an old woman great joy," she said. "Thank you." There was nothing more to say. I squeezed her hand once, then walked out into the dim morning light. I did not pick up any more passengers that shift. I drove aimlessly, lost in thought. We are so conditioned to think that our lives revolve around great moments. But great moments often catch us unawares. When that woman hugged me and said that I had brought her joy, it was possible to believe that I had been placed on earth for the sole purpose of providing her with that last ride. I do not think that I have ever done anything in my life that was any more important.ⁱⁱⁱ

The writer, Kent Nerburn, now speaks across the country, and writes, on faith and hope and grace. That moment with the hospice-bound woman was surely a second touch for him – as it most surely for her.

You can't always know how it will come, that second touch. All you can know, for sure, for certain, is that it will. That moment when faith finds its clarity, when hope is greater than anything else, when joy bubbles up. "Can you see now?" said Jesus, "now, can you see it?"

Yes, said the man, yes, now, I see.

So too it can be for each one of us. So too will it be. Amen.

ⁱ 1 Name changed!

ⁱⁱ More about Dr. Lillian Cingo and her train at: <http://www.fd.iofc.org/node/27574>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://kentnerburn.com/>