

Mark 8:22-28**Feb. 4 2024**

So, folks, we are thirty-five days into the new year,
and I'm just wondering –
how are those New Year's Resolutions going for you?
While you ponder, let me bring you up to speed on mine.

The plan was to learn Italian,
do a guided meditation every afternoon,
get back to counting points on Weight Watchers again,
and read more, to try to keep up with my husband.

Here is how that's going.

The last thing I learned in Italian was two weeks ago,
when I discovered how to say that

Francesco is bringing lots of sandwiches to the picnic.

Francesco porta tanti panini.

I don't know when I will need to say that, ever.

The last guided meditation I tried was on Monday,
but I was using an app on the phone and the phone rang
so I had to answer it of course,

had a nice chat with my daughter

and then remembered all the things I still had to do.

Counting Weight Watchers points lasted about a day –
pecan pie, 24 points, daily allowance gone, forget that.

And reading – I will get to that today, I swear.

What's really annoying is that for all of these activities
I set up reminders on my phone.

So every day there are these pop-ups
that have gone from being encouraging –

“Don't forget to meditate!” –

to sounding like a very, very disappointed parent:

“You’re going to forget everything you learned.
Everything.”

So, that’s me!
Hoping yours are going better.
But if not – join the crowd.
And be gentle with yourself.
Be gentle.

I read a lovely little article the other day that said
February is the time for resolutions, round two,
but this time being a little kinder to yourself,
a little more understanding of the pace of change and growth.
Show yourself some grace and compassion,
instead of beating yourself up, it said.
Celebrate whatever incremental change you’ve managed,
take a deep breath,
and give it another go. Resolutions, take two.

Which actually brings me, in a roundabout way,
to today’s scripture, one of the loveliest there is,
I think,
where Jesus, and the man he’s healing,
need a second chance at getting things right,
a second attempt.

It’s a tiny little story,
all of six verses long.
Goes like this:
Passing through the little town of Bethsaida,
on his way to somewhere more important,

Jesus comes across a blind man.
 Actually, he comes across the blind man's *friends*,
 who have dragged him out to meet Jesus,
 and it's the friends 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.

Years and years ago,
 in June of 2002,
 I was scheduled to preach on Father's Day.
 And I had this idea to honor my dad by preaching on his favorite
 bible story, whatever it might be.
 So I called him and asked him for his favorite scripture story.

Now, my dad is one of the most faithful people I know,
 not to mention being one of the nuttiest and funniest –

then and now.
so I knew he'd have an answer.
And it was this story he picked,
this story of Jesus and the blind man
who needs a second touch to be healed.

Here's what my Dad said to me, from my notes
way back then:

"I love this story," he said,
"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."
And it seems to me,"
said my father,
"it seems to me that this is really all about us, this story.
It seems to me that all of us,
need a second touch.
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."

It's true, isn't it?

Whatever it is we need help with,
whatever change we try to make,
chances are we will need God's help
not just once but again.

Chances are we will need Jesus' gentle touch on our spirits
not just once but again, and again.

And of course now I'm talking about
something a little more than Duolingo Italian lessons
and counting pecan pie points.

I'm talking about the healings of the spirit
that we all yearn for,
the things we hope for in ourselves and our relationships
that need some holy help,
some gentle touch from beyond ourselves.

Maybe there's something about our way of being
that we'd like to be a little different –
maybe we're hoping to be more patient,
maybe we're trying to be a positive presence,
maybe we're seeking for a little more wisdom,
a little more understanding.

Or maybe it's much more than that,
maybe we know that something's got to give,
something within us truly needs to change.

Whatever clarity of vision we need,
whatever blindnesses we're trying to shed,
all of us have that for which we need God's healing,
and need it again and again.

A writer whose work I love to read is Mary Luti,

a pastor in this denomination, and a beloved seminary professor. The other day my Daily Devotional from the United Church of Christ was by Mary Luti, and on this passage.

She reflected on how, for many of us, healing and change takes a long time, and a lot more than two touches from a healing God.

She writes this:

“What surprises me about this story is not that it takes two tries (for Jesus to heal him), it’s that it takes only two.

My own healing is requiring a lot more than that.

I can’t tell you how many times the Healer has laid his hands on me, then asked “Are you good now?” and I’ve had to tell him no, that [...] he’ll have to try again.

Today, tomorrow, next year, and the year after that.”

Rev. Luti goes on to say

“Healing is a gift and a choice.

Sometimes we aren’t able to receive the gift or make the choice.

Sometimes we’re not quite ready to heal.

Sometimes we just don’t know how.

And sometimes we can only take a little healing at a time.

I like to imagine that Jesus performed this two-stage healing on purpose,

to let us know that healing may not fully take the first time,

that it’s okay,

that he’ll always be with us,

that he’ll always try again if we need him to.

Because with him there’s always more.”

As it happens, I’ve got a healing story very close to home to share, a story about my husband David

that I not only have permission to tell you, but encouragement. Ironically enough, given today's scripture,

David has just had eye surgery, surgery to help *him* see more clearly.

He had a cataract removed from one eye, and then the other.

It's one of those things, he said, that once you start talking with people about, you discover that everyone of a certain age has already done it, and all of them are encouraging you to do it, too, promising that it will be worth it.

But healing was a process, and *choosing* healing was its own process, just like Mary Luti wrote.

David had to come to the point of acknowledging his need to be healed –

an acknowledgment that meant accepting that things were not as they should be.

And even when that point was reached, and he reluctantly agreed that the time had come, then it had to be not one touch but two – one eye restored, and then a time of rest, and then the next.

And now, well, now he sees what everyone was talking about – literally sees.

David is stunned to discover the brightness of colors that he hadn't even realized had faded:

has your sweater always been that blue? he said the other day.

So in our household,

today's scripture has particular resonance:

the wonder of healing, and new clarity of vision

is very real right now.

I'm going to close by reminding you of what my dad said,
my dad who may well be listening right now.

"It seems to me," he said,

"that this is really all about us.

That all of us need a second touch.

Jesus says, "Can you see yet?"

And we say, "Things are still pretty fuzzy."

And so he stays with us until we see.

In the end, if we're honest, isn't that why all of us are here?

Isn't that why all of us have somehow found our way into this place,
into church?

Because we need a second touch.

Somewhere in our lives, we need a second chance at healing,
another try.

And we come here.

And maybe it's actually a third or fourth or fifth touch we seek,
and that's okay too.

Jesus isn't going to leave our side.

"Because with him there's always more."

Because with him there's *always* more.

Amen.