*Touch and prayer share the same power.*

In 1969, Universal Studios released a film with Elvis Presley’s last acting role: *A Change of Habit*. In it, three Roman Catholic nuns (one of whom is played by Mary Tyler Moore)—before making their final vows—are sent to a rough inner-city neighborhood dressed not in their habits but in street clothes. (They’ve had a “change of habit.”) They work at a clinic run by a young doctor who does not know that they are nuns: the doctor is played, of course, by Elvis. It must be acknowledged that Elvis was not a great actor and his films are not great. Even so, in the Internet Movie Data Base’s ranking of Elvis’ thirty-one films from best to worst, *A Change of Habit* is tied for 19th—the bottom third tier of a mostly unwatchable genre. Nevertheless, there is one scene that almost redeems the film. Amanda is a little girl in the clinic who is thought to be deaf, mute, and emotionally cut off. Her aunt has brought Amanda to the clinic; Amanda’s mother abandoned her, never having wanted her. While there, Amanda falls into a full-bodied rage. Elvis collects her in his arms and, over the span of hours, lets her give way to her anger, all the while telling her that he loves her, and all the while the nuns echo his love and internally pray. Eventually, Amanda tires and Elvis asks, again and again, “Mad?” “Mad?” In response, the girl speaks. She speaks her first word, she says what she feels: “Mad.” Elvis repeats the word with her again and again. Then he asks, “Love?” “Love?” and over time the girl speaks her second word, she says what she is learning: “Love.” Finally, having expressed her anger at her abandonment and her love for those who care for her, she speaks her next two words: “Hungry,” and “Home.” A changed girl, Amanda goes home with her aunt. Say what you will, but it is a touching scene. Elvis, the young doctor, heals a little girl through human touch and patient, relentless love. *A Change of Habit* may not have much else going for it, but it does stress the truth that touch and prayer share the same power.

Today’s Gospel reading, continuing our journey through Mark’s Gospel, describes two healing miracles in which Jesus either touches or is touched by two people in need. Having crossed the sea, where as we heard last week Jesus calmed the storm that threatened their vessel, Jesus is approached by a man named Jairus, the town’s pastor, who begs Jesus to come home with him. His twelve year-old daughter is sick and at her last end. Jesus immediately agrees and they hastily depart. They are followed by a large crowd that presses in on them from all sides and slows their progress. Suddenly, their urgent journey is interrupted: a woman reaches out and touches Jesus.

St. Mark describes the woman’s plight in uncharacteristic detail. For the previous twelve years she had suffered from chronic uterine bleeding; because of her condition, she had suffered many treatments from many doctors who not only did not heal her but made her condition worse. Even worse, in the process of these treatments, she had bankrupted herself. Even worse still, the nature of her condition required that she be cut off from any relationship with her people. The Old Testament hygiene laws in Leviticus that deal with bodily discharges (Lev. 15) declare that menstruating women would be considered unclean for seven days: they were prohibited from having contact with anyone anywhere, especially in religious activities: during those seven days, everything and everyone they touched would also be considered unclean. Therefore, because of the woman’s constant bleeding, she had lived in a continual state of ritual “uncleanness” and social and religious isolation—she had not known human touch for twelve years. Finally, in desperation, she joins the crowd that presses in on Jesus; she tells herself that if she can just touch even the edge of the hem of His cloak she will be healed. We cannot imagine the intensity of her mixed emotions: lonely, sad, and, no doubt, angry for being excluded without having done anything wrong. Above all, she travels in fearful secrecy: she must not let the crowd around her and Rabbi Jesus Himself learn about her condition; they must not know that her efforts to be healed have brought them into contact with her and made them unclean. That is why, when she succeeds in touching His robe and is immediately healed, and when Jesus feels the healing power come from His Body and stops the parade to ask who touched Him, she comes to Him trembling in fear. Her secret action, as well as all of her secret feelings, are about to be revealed. But when she confesses what she has done and, in fact, tells Him the whole truth about what her life has been like, Jesus does not reject or condemn her. Instead, He praises her for having such trust in Him and for her resilient tenacity. Then He releases her to go home in peace, reassuring her that not only is she healed (in the Greek, *iatai*) of her condition but that she will be made whole (in the Greek, *hugies*): as she now is free from her affliction, so too will she be completely restored from all of the emotional damage, financial ruin, and personal isolation that she had suffered. The pattern is: she prays for healing, she comes forward to touch Him, and she is healed and made whole. Touch and prayer share the same power.

Meanwhile, poor Jairus waits with anxious helplessness while the Man he had hoped would heal his dying daughter has stopped and is chatting with this woman. We cannot imagine his frustration and fear. Just as Jesus and the crowd resume their journey to his home, his worst fears come true: friends arrive with the news that his daughter is dead. Sharing Jairus’ sadness and anger at Jesus’ delay, they say, contemptuously, “Why trouble, why bother, why deal with this “teacher” anymore?” Acknowledging Jairus’ pain, Jesus encourages him to continue to believe and to continue home. Once there, Jesus enters the room where Jairus’ daughter lay and her touches her, taking her hand with His. It must be understood that this is the second time that day that Jesus had contact with someone who was unclean: the Old Testament books of Numbers (19:11-13) and Leviticus (21:1-4, 11) declared that anyone who touched a dead body or even entered a room with a dead body was to be isolated from the community for at least seven days, just like menstruating women. Nevertheless, Jesus does just that. He takes her hand, tells the her to get up, and the girl’s life is revived. Jesus then instructs those around her to give the hungry girl something to eat. The pattern is repeated: Jairus prays to Jesus that He come home with Him, Jesus touches his daughter, and she comes back from the dead. Touch and prayer share the same power.

Touch is not limited to physical contact; touch also encompasses emotional sympathy and empathy. When we are emotionally moved by someone’s pain, we say that we are “touched.” When we acknowledge and respond to people’s negative feelings, it is as comforting to them as if we have come alongside them and held them. A mentor of mine called it “wrapping our ears around” someone. That is why St. Paul instructs us to “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep (Roman 12:15).” But, as always, Christ’s healing miracles are not primarily about us and what we do; they are about Jesus and what He has done for us. At His Incarnation, when God the Son of God entered His own Creation in His Person, He touched and embraced every physical and emotional level of our human nature: His body, mind, soul, and will are just like ours. His sadness and joy, loneliness and friendship, grief and comfort are just like ours. Furthermore, He has touched, embraced, and freed us from the poison of our secrets: He exposes and heals all of our secret pain, secret guilt, and secret sadness. He is the one, as our liturgy describes, unto whom “all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.” He touched and embraced even our sin by embracing the Cross, which is consequence of all sin. St. Paul almost goes too far when he writes, “God made Him Who knew no sin to become sin for us (II Corinthians 5:21).” He even touched and embraced our death through His own death and burial. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, the theologian and 4th century bishop of Constantinople, wrote that “what has not been assumed [by Christ] has not been saved (Epistle 101).” In other words, whatever Christ has not touched and embraced has not been saved and redeemed. But because there is literally nothing in our mortal life that Jesus has not touched and embraced, there is nothing that He has not and will not hug, hold, and heal.; therefore, there is literally nothing we need to fear.

Like the bleeding woman, we are the ones who say, “If I can just touch the hem of His garment I will be healed.” Like Jairus’ daughter, we are the ones to whom Jesus says, “Rise up.” Like little Amanda in *A Change of Habit*, we are the ones who learn to speak the four most important words: “Mad” because of our pain, loneliness, brokenness, and weakness; “Love” because He has loved us and taught us that we and everyone else are beloved and loveable. “Hungry,” because we yearn for the Living Bread of Heaven who came down from Heaven to share His life. And “Home,” because He has prepared for us a place in His Father’s house, where there are many mansions, where we will see all whom we have loved and lost, where He will live with us forever, whence He intercedes for us to the Father and sends us the Holy Spirit. Touch and prayer share the same power. Our Lord’s loving touch, which takes our brokenness and makes us whole, shares the power of His prayer, which is the prayer of the Eucharist, which is our prayer together today, which takes broken bread, broken hearts, and broken lives and make them not only whole, but holy. Through His love and prayer Jesus hugs, holds, and heals us from all that hurts, confuses, and grieves us. Then, having made us whole, He carries us Home with Him.