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*Raising Up and Casting Out*

An embrace. A hand on a shoulder. A touch. There are some things in life we never forget. During a particularly traumatic night when I was experiencing grief and confusion, a friend of mine walked over to me and did not say a word- but simply touched my shoulder. She moved in my direction.

Early in 2021, during the pandemic, *The Guardian* published an essay titled *The Power of Touch*, is this the sense we've missed the most. The memories of those days live in us as a kind of trauma. We had to opt for facetime because face to face was too dangerous. We could not reach out and offer or receive an understanding touch or embrace from those outside our bubbles. We trained ourselves to move away.

We know the direction God moves in. This is who God is. It is something Lutherans love to emphasize, or at least we should. God always comes down to us. We never have to work our way up to God. God is not a metaphysical mystery of divinity off in the Heavens that we have to grasp for but the promise keeper relentlessly in motion- moving toward you.

Isaiah proclaims that the everlasting God, the one who numbered the stars, does not faint or grow weary as we do. Even more, the God of all creation gives and will give strength to the powerless. The Triune God is always searching out those who are in exile, or otherwise at the end of themselves. Moving toward them.

Ever since his baptism some weeks ago, Jesus has been on the move- and quickly. Immediately upon leaving the synagogue Jesus walks straight into the very presence of sickness and death. Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever. The list of curses in Deuteronomy includes fever. How does God made flesh respond to someone thought to be under divine punishment? He reaches out. Moves in her direction. Touches her. Jesus draws near to her, takes her by the hand, and raises her up. The Greek word used there is the same used for resurrection later in Mark. Healed and raised, she begins to serve.

Jesus- continued to go where others dare not travel. He runs headlong into sickness and death and is met by those who find themselves possessed by many demons. Wherever he goes and wherever he shows up he reaches out with a healing touch. He raises them up and casts out what had been possessing them.

Things haven't changed much since the first century as Jesus wandered from village to village doing the work God had given him to do. Even now we find ourselves yearning for healing, relief, and release. Disease, death, and myriad tragedies find their way to us. Still, we are possessed by powers that hold us captive. Things that seem to have some kind of outsized power over us. Social media, expectations, white supremacy, exploitation of others, the nostalgia of church the way it used to be, addiction, all hold some sway over us. We grow weary and tired. We long for freedom but we aren't even sure what exactly is possessing us anymore. It's just our everyday attire.

Today so much can be virtual and it is easier than ever to stay in our own silos. We are captive to our own personal worlds. So many of us and our neighbors long for safe loving touch, and the affirmation and healing that can bring. How do we step into that?

God is never far away. Jesus said "this is what I came out to do." Included in that is his ascent to the cross and his descent into death and hell itself. He moves toward the hells of this world and your life. So healing might come to you and all of creation in the fullness of time. On the cross his arms reach out wide enough to touch and embrace you. Foreshadowed by Simon's mother in law, he is raised up again. Raised to serve. To move towards you. By joining our own vulnerable bodies to his broken one. We are given life that stretches into eternity.

He calls you to follow him out of every stuck place. Lay down your grave clothes and all that possess you. You have put on Christ. Nothing that possesses you has power over the one who is your clothing and will cast out death once and for all.

Today, the risen Christ moves toward you. Hidden in plain sight. He serves you with his body and blood placed in your hand he will never let you go. And the community gathered. Your hand- Christs. He is here in touch, taste, sound, community, and promise when we can't believe on our own or our senses are stunted by doubt or despair.

Raised up, Paul became a servant of all. We are called to move in the same direction. Reaching out as the hands and feet of Christ. We join others, arm-in-arm. Put ourselves out there. We cross the divides of our hearts, open ourselves to what might happen if we dared to embrace those on the other side of our lives, cultures, or convictions, or let ourselves be embraced. We serve them as Christ- and dare to be served by them. As Christ they lift us into resurrection life.

There is a song called *Stay Connected* which is performed by a predominantly black church on the south side. During a class in seminary our professor played this song and invited all of us to join her (a strong, fierce, brilliant black woman) in the center of the room and dance with her. She invited us to move in her direction. Joining her we were raised out of ourselves and into something new. Embraced.

As we lift each other up, embrace, move towards others, and welcome them with a loving touch, we bear witness to the one who has forever moved in our direction. Christ joins you. And reaches out with his wounded hands, takes yours, and leads you forward into resurrection life, with each new day.