

Scandal, Personal Space, and Passing the Peace

A sermon on John 12:1-8 & Luke 7:36-50 by Nathan Nettleton, 7 April 2019

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Message

Jesus shows us that being overly cautious about the boundaries of personal space and touch can, especially in worship, risk excluding, stigmatising and humiliating people.

Sermon

(The sections shown in purple were omitted from the live preached version)

In the hour that I sat down to begin writing this sermon, there was not one but two stories on the ABC news about the social boundaries of physical touch.

The first said that the former United States vice-president Joe Biden has promised to be “much more mindful” of respecting personal space after acknowledging his tendency towards physical displays of affection made some women uncomfortable. He said, “Social norms have begun to change. They’ve shifted, and the boundaries of protecting personal space have been reset. And I get it. I get it. I hear what they are saying. I understand.”

In the second, a policeman in Western Australia was cleared on charges of indecent assault for pinching a woman’s bum. Magistrate Michelle Ridley ruled that “in an era of twerking” and easy access to pornography, the bum pinch did not constitute an “indecent assault”.

I’m not here to comment on whether Joe Biden really gets it, or whether Magistrate Michelle Ridley got it right, though I have my doubts on both, but I do want to talk about how we negotiate the boundaries around personal space and personal touch. It is relevant to today’s gospel reading and it is relevant to some of our own congregational practices right here in the Sunday liturgy.

You may be surprised where this is going to go. I’m a bit surprised myself. Because despite agreeing with Joe Biden that the social norms and rules have changed and that therefore men especially need to recognise that many types of touch that used to be considered normal are actually highly inappropriate; despite that, I am going to end up suggesting that within the liturgy, we should actually be more free, rather than less free, about touching one another. Hang in there with me. I think it will make sense in the end!

The story we heard from John’s gospel tonight told of an incident of intimate physical touch that shocked and disturbed those who witnessed it. Mary of Bethany opened some very expensive perfumed cream and used it to massage Jesus’s feet, and then wiped them with her hair.

The detail about her letting down her hair and using it to dry his feet was included for its shock value, because in that culture, the attitudes and practices around women’s hair were a bit like those of many hijab-wearing Muslim women and some orthodox Jews even today. A woman did not uncover and let down her hair in the presence of anyone but her husband, and then only in private. When John says that she massaged his feet and dried them with her hair, his original readers would react much like we would react if it said that she took off all her clothes and gave him a foot massage.

To the first readers, and to the actual witnesses, this is an unexpected violation of the social norms around intimate physical touch, and they would have been all the more bewildered when Jesus did not pull away and reject such intimacies, especially in front of others.

There are differing versions of this story in all four gospels. Matthew's and Mark's versions are almost identical, and put less emphasis on the intimacy and more on the dispute afterwards about whether the cream should have been sold and the money given to the poor. John's version still includes that dispute but there is greater emphasis on the intimacy. **The intimacy has more context too, because unlike the other three versions where the woman is an anonymous stranger gate-crashing a dinner party, John identifies her as Mary of Bethany, who with her sister Martha and brother Lazarus appear frequently in this gospel as some of Jesus's closest friends, and the dinner party is taking place in her own house. Such intimacies from a close friend would have raised even more speculation about the extent and the appropriateness of this relationship.**

Luke's version (Luke 7:36-50) is the most different and the most focused on the reaction of the onlookers to the intimate touch itself. **I won't get to preach on Luke's version this year, because it is assigned to one of the weeks that disappears when Easter falls as late as it does this year, so tonight's sermon will have to do for both versions.**

In Luke's version, the response is not about selling the cream to fund a gift to the poor. Luke explicitly tells us that the pharisee who hosts the dinner party is disgusted that Jesus is accepting intimate physical attentions from the wrong kind of woman. And Jesus, far from playing it down, puts the spotlight clearly on the physical touch. He says to the Pharisee, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment."

So although John's version does include the conversation about whether the cream should have been used to raise money for the poor, please forgive me for leaving that detail untouched tonight, and following Luke and John in focussing our attention instead on the intimate physical touch and the discomfort we experience when the usual social boundaries around touch are not properly understood or adhered to.

And to do that, I want to pose a question about these stories, and then use that question to jump across to something that goes on in our Sunday liturgies.

First my question. The onlookers at this dinner party were clearly shocked that Jesus didn't draw back and reject this woman's touch. Judas's comments about selling the cream and giving the money to the poor sound more like the blustering of a man who's so shocked and bewildered that he doesn't know what to say and so he locks in on some random detail where he feels safer. Simon the Pharisee knows exactly what he thinks, and he's disgusted and appalled. He's going straight to the Professional Standards Committee with allegations of breach of boundaries and inappropriate conduct. So we know for sure that the people present thought that Jesus should have pulled back and rejected the woman's touch.

But my question is this: what would have happened if he had? I'm not thinking about Judas and Simon here. I'm thinking about the woman. What would it have done to her if Jesus had recoiled from her and refused to let her touch him? Take a moment to think about that. Imagine yourself in her shoes. Jesus describes her as someone who has found great forgiveness through him and who is now expressing great love the best way she knows how (Luke 7:47). John implies that she realises that Jesus will soon be dead and that this might be her last chance to express her love and gratitude to him. If that was you there, trying to express your love and gratitude, what would it be like if Jesus pulled back and pushed you away, rejecting your touch as though it might contaminate him?

Hold that thought, and come back with me into our Sunday liturgy, right here. There is a point in our liturgy each week where loving physical touch is ritualised between us. It is of course the passing of the peace. In a couple of weeks time we'll do foot washing too, but that's just once a year. We pass the peace every week, and it would probably rank as one of the most problematic components of the liturgy. I think there are two main reasons for that, and they interact with each other and make each other worse.

The first is that, as we have already been considering, different people have different levels of comfort with physical touch and, nowadays more than ever, we are all a bit uncertain about the boundaries and exactly where they lie and what they mean.

The second is that the ritual or symbolic meaning of passing the peace is often not well understood or easily forgotten, and when that happens, it easily degenerates into nothing more meaningful than a cheery little meet and greet break popped into the worship service. Nothing more than "turn and say hello to those seated near you".

How do these two interact? Well, when you mostly think of it as a meet and greet break, and you feel a bit wary about the boundaries of personal space and physical touch, two things happen. Firstly, you are most likely to seek out your best friends to exchange the peace, because they are both the people you most feel like catching up with anyway, and they are the people with whom you are least likely to misread the cues and stuff up the boundaries. Secondly, you are most likely to veer away from the people who you don't know so well and/or who seem the most damaged or timid about intimate social interaction and physical touch.

Sometimes we are entirely well-meaning about this, or at least we are trying to be. We are trying to read people's body language, and evaluate whether they really want us to come into their space and offer them our hands. And if they look a bit terrified or a bit averse to being approached, we try to be respectful of that, and perhaps just give them a smile and a wave to wish them well, and then get back to reaching our hands out to the more confident and comfortable.

But there is something that happens when we do that, even if we are trying to be entirely respectful and compassionate about it. And I know that this happens because I've recently had my eyes opened to it by listening to people in this congregation who have been frequently on the receiving end of it.

Bring back that feeling you had when you imagined yourself as Mary of Bethany, but you imagined Jesus drawing back and rejecting your touch. Imagine that feeling right here. Imagine yourself as someone who is quite timid and fearful about working out the rights and

wrongs of participating in such a physical ritual. Maybe you're just new here and everyone is a stranger to you still. Maybe you've suffered physical abuse in the past that has left you craving healthy safe physical affection but understandably afraid of seeking it too. Or maybe you've experienced a lot of open rejection in your life – perhaps you have faced a lot of racism, or you have an obvious physical deformity or disability, or a mental illness, or you live on the streets, or you don't speak much English – so you are all too used to people averting their eyes and walking by on the other side.

So here you are in the liturgy, and there is no way you could bring yourself to take the initiative and just walk boldly up to others and offer your hand and your greeting. You almost shrink into yourself in terror. Here are all these people confidently expressing their love and good will to one another, but you couldn't possibly muster the courage to jump in. But what is even more terrifying and paralysing is that you know you might get overlooked again. Even here people might avert their eyes, or at most give you a smile before scurrying on to greet their friends, leaving you alone, untouched and dying of humiliation.

What would it be like if Jesus, if the body of Christ, pulled back and pushed you away, rejecting your touch as though it might contaminate him? What if he offered a warm hug or handshake to everyone else, and nothing more than a nod across the room to you? What would it be like?

Thinking about what that would be like is one way of changing the ways we are getting this wrong, but I think that understanding what passing the peace is supposed to be will probably help too. Passing the peace is not a random meet and greet break in the liturgy. The reason that it happens as part of our preparation for sharing communion at the Lord's Table is that it is specifically related to our communion, community, unity. It originally came into the liturgy as a ritualisation of what Jesus told us in the sermon on the mount: "If you are offering your gift at the altar, and you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23-34) We make a mockery of the Lord's Table if we seek to feed from it but we refuse to humble ourselves and make peace with one another.

Although I've often seen people overlooked and left out of the passing of the peace here, it is a long time since I've seen anyone angrily refuse a hand offered to them. But if I ever do see any of you do it, believe me, you won't be receiving communion that night. That is precisely what the passing of the peace is about. Shaking hands with your friends and turning your back on the person who you had fallen out with would be the exact opposite of what the passing of the peace is about. So the passing of the peace is the crucial part of how you examine yourself to see if you are ready to come to the table. Is there someone here that I can't express peace and good will to? If so, I need to sort that out before I can come to the table again.

So the two most important aspects of the passing of the peace are firstly reconciliation wherever there has been a falling out or a broken relationship, and secondly the creation or expansion of the eucharistic community to visibly and tangibly include those who might not yet have been fully included or who are most in danger of being left on the fringes, overlooked, and falling out of our reach.

So let me finish up with some intensely practical instruction for how to go about the passing of the peace. Whenever we pass the peace, I want you to ask yourself three questions and let the answers to those questions guide you as to who you seek out as you are sharing the peace.

The first question is “is there anyone here tonight who might have reason to doubt whether I appreciate their presence and wish them God’s richest blessings?” Probably that is someone you have had a fight or a falling out with, but there could be other reasons why someone feels rejected by you. They are your first priority in the passing of the peace. You need to go and genuinely wish them the peace and blessings of God, and if you are unwilling to do that, then you should self-exclude from communion.

The second question is “who are the people here who I am least connected to, and who perhaps are least well integrated into our community life?” Who are the people who I don’t know very well, or who I feel a bit unsure or uncomfortable around, or who I don’t really know how to talk to or relate to, or who look a bit timid or terrified of all this flurry of social interaction? Who are the people who might not have Mary of Bethany’s brazenness but who might desperately need to know that Jesus isn’t overlooking them but is seeking them out and offering a touch, a greeting, an expression of hope and love.

I know that feels risky, because I’ve done the same thing. It feels safer and even more respectful to not step into the personal space of someone who looks unsure whether they want it. But even if they are unsure that they want it, the long term effect of being politely left out is far more devastating. Believe me. There are people who have had that experience here, among us. Often. We need to repent.

So long as you don’t start imposing uninvited cuddles and kisses on people, there is no danger of a sexual harassment complaint from a warm handshake within the safe boundaries of a structured liturgical ritual. But there is clear and certain danger of people feeling excluded if you decide for them that they don’t want you near them. If they really don’t want people near them, they will self-exclude by going outside until we finish. We’ve had people who do that. So if they are still here, and you recognise that they might not yet feel fully loved and welcomed and accepted and appreciated by you, then they are your next priority in the passing of the peace.

And thirdly, who are the friends you feel completely comfortable with. Make sure that you still share the peace with several of them, so that the passing of the peace doesn’t become a way of spotlighting and embarrassing those who are more on the margins. We don’t want to set up a scenario where if someone offers you the peace, you panic that they don’t like you or feel comfortable around you!!

So mix it up. Include your friends, but if this ritual is to be genuine and meaningful, make it your priority to include the people you would most likely instinctively and even unconsciously leave out, either because of how you feel about them or because they seem more on the outside. If you’re unsure about it, remember Mary of Bethany and what she would have felt like if Jesus had refused to go near her.

And let me close with two apologies. To those of you who have felt excluded and unwanted when we have averted our eyes and bypassed you during the liturgy, I say sorry. I know I have sometimes been one of the offenders, and I am not alone. I can’t speak on behalf of everyone

because that's not a conversation we've had, but I can say that I am sorry. You have been wounded by me and by us, and I am sorry.

And secondly, I want to apologise to all of you for the fact that the passing of the peace is going to feel incredibly awkward tonight!! We are all going to feel really anxious and self-conscious and we'll all be overthinking it. I'm sorry. Sometimes when my Tae Kwondo instructor tells me to change the angle of my foot on a particular kick, my next attempt sees me fall on my face in an ungainly crumpled heap. While I was concentrating on one aspect of the kick, everything else fell apart. And it can take a couple of weeks to rebuild my kick with its new improved foot angle. This is going to be a bit like that, but if we accept a few weeks of awkward self-consciousness while we rebuild our practice, we will relax into a much healthier place, and our communion will be much the stronger for it.

And the Judases and the Simon the Pharisees can say what they like, but the body of Christ will be all the richer and more fragrant with the intoxicating smell of generous tangible welcoming love.