

“The Power of Proximity: Getting Close to God”
Luke 8:43-48
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC
Rev. Julia Watkins
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Now there was a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years, and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. She came up behind [Jesus] and touched the fringe of his cloak, and immediately her flow of blood stopped. Then Jesus asked, “Who touched me?” When they all denied it, Peter said, “Master, the crowds are hemming you in and pressing against you.” But Jesus said, “Someone touched me, for I noticed that power had gone out from me.” When the woman realized that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling, and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him and how she had been immediately healed. He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.”

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

This week and next, I’d like to invite you to explore with me “the power of proximity.” *The power of proximity*, beginning today with proximity to God and following next Sunday with proximity to our neighbors.

I’ll be up front with you and admit that I borrowed this buzz word, *proximity*, from one of my personal heroes, Bryan Stevenson, whom I had the privilege of hearing speak here in Greenville just a few months ago. You may know Stevenson as the courageous and deeply hopeful public interest lawyer who has dedicated his career to helping the poor, the incarcerated, and the condemned. He is also the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative and author of *Just Mercy*, a powerful book in which he shares stories from his career and paves a way toward justice with a few succinct, but striking, proposals, including this one: get proximate. Get proximate.

Stevenson’s earliest memories of proximity begin with his grandmother. As a child, he lived around the corner from her in a poor, rural community in Delaware, and they were very close. Every time they saw one another, Stevenson’s grandmother would pull him close and hug him so tightly that he could barely breathe. After a while, she would let him go, but a few hours later, she would ask, “Bryan, do you still feel me hugging you?” If he said yes, she would let him be, but if he said no, she would assault him again. Often, he said no simply because it made him happy to be wrapped in her arms.

As he grew up, Stevenson’s education carried him further from home, first to a small college outside Philadelphia and later to Harvard Law School. Despite the distance, he made sure to visit home as often as he could. Each time, his grandmother would be waiting at the door to pull him into her formidable arms, squeezing him even tighter now that he was a grown man. Letting their embrace linger, she would ask him that same question, “Bryan, do you still feel me hugging you?” “She never tired of pulling me toward her,” Stevenson writes.

Several years into his career, Stevenson received a sudden call to come home. His grandmother’s health had been declining for some time, and it turned out she was nearing the end of her life. By the time he got there, she was confined to her bed, her voice a mere echo of its

former boom. Stevenson sat down beside her. He had to lean in close to hear her whisper, “Bryan, do you still feel me hugging you?” Of course, the answer was then and remains to this day, “yes.”

Even now, Stevenson is shaped by his grandmother’s love, which derives its strength from its proximity. Though she was the matriarch of a large family—the mother of ten children and grandmother of many more—she drew near to each member as a reminder of their unique belovedness, always making sure they could feel her close. Her love was—and still is—powerful because it is proximate.

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While the word *proximity* may not, *per se*, appear in any of our confessions or creeds, I’d like to propose that it is nevertheless core to our identity as those who seek to follow Jesus. Proximity is the difference between a God who remains far off and one who draws near to us. It’s what distinguishes our Christian faith from some vague spirituality.

Proximity proclaims that the same God who spangled the heavens with some of the awe-inspiring images we saw through the Webb telescope this past week is also intimately close, claiming and calling the likes of the newly baptized baby Preston, as well as you and me. Proximity describes the mysterious relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, somehow distinct but still joined in an immeasurably close dance. Proximity is what John’s gospel was pointing to in its opening lines: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with* God, and the Word *was* God.” It’s what one paraphrased portion of the bible means when it says that in Christ, “God moved into the neighborhood.”

When I think *proximity*, I think *incarnation*. I think *Emmanuel*. That is, I think *God-with-us* and, by extension, I think *us-with-one another*. Proximity reminds us that we belong to one another. Its power lies in the strength of our relationships, which foster a sense of true belonging and bind us to something bigger than ourselves. To put it simply, proximity means that God is near, and so are we.

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Of course, it doesn’t always feel that way. There are times when God doesn’t seem close at all, when we feel isolated, and we may even begin to question our faith.

Sometimes, it’s the weight of the world that makes us wonder. Where is God amid war and famine, violence and injustice? How could God let such things happen? When will God save us from our ignorance and greed?

At least as often, it’s matters closer to home that give us pause. A relationship is fractured, and you’re not sure how to forgive. You hardly recognize the people you once called friends, or you realize your own child has become unfamiliar. Or, maybe your body is limiting you in ways you never expected, or you’re grieving a loss like the one Mark Matlock so poignantly describes on the cover of today’s Harbinger. Maybe you’re feeling anxious or off-kilter, or just a bit alone.

Other times, it’s simply that we’re busy or, if not really busy, then otherwise distracted with everything from our to-do lists to our Netflix queue, and when we look up momentarily, we realize that God hasn’t occurred to us for days or even weeks at a time.

Maybe you know what I mean. At some point or another, we’re almost certain to experience God as distant, and if it’s not enough to make us set our faith aside altogether, we’re likely to wonder, “what can I do to get closer to God?”

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Of course, we're not alone. Scripture is filled with people who struggle with a sense of God's absence. In fact, each of the passages we heard earlier describes individuals with reason to feel as though God has abandoned them.

Take the woman in Luke's gospel. As the story goes, she's been bleeding for twelve years, and despite all her doctors' visits, she's experienced no relief. It's hard to imagine she hasn't grown cynical about her situation. To begin with, she was in a great deal of physical discomfort, and she had surely spent the brunt of her resources in search of a cure. If that weren't bad enough, according to Jewish law, she would have been considered unclean and therefore set apart from the rest of society. Poor, in pain, and alone, she seeks the only remaining solution she can imagine.

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I remember acting out what comes next as a part of one particularly memorable class when I was in seminary. It was Intro to Preaching with Professor Anna Carter Florence, who often drew upon her theater background for creative teaching moments. Our class was on a Monday morning, and as I mentioned, we were studying the story of the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. Though there's plenty in the passage to spark interest, many of us were still waking up, and it may have showed. As we droned from one verse to the next, Anna suddenly sprang to her feet, imploring us to join her, "Ok, up! Everybody up!"

She shooed all forty-or-so of us out of our seats and toward the narrow hallway, where she began assigning roles. "You!" she pointed at one student, "You're the woman." "And you'll be Peter, and you can be Jesus," she allowed a few others. "And the rest of you, well, you're the crowd." We sighed, though whether relieved or disappointed, it was hard to say. "Now," Anna exclaimed, "let's act it out!"

So, we assembled as the text described, the majority of us hemming Jesus in and pressing him from behind. I found myself smooshed against Jesus' left shoulder, shuffling my feet a few inches at a time to keep with the current of the crowd. At the edge of the huddle, Anna gave the assigned woman a little nudge, and she started slowly weaving her way through the tightly packed mass toward the classmate cast as Lord.

She struggled for several minutes to make any progress in the crowd, but with some strategic maneuvering and a few good shoves, she finally made it within a few feet of Jesus. For the final push, she reached out her arm, extending her fingers as far as they would go until finally, finally they brushed the very edge of Jesus' chosen attire: not a cloak, as scripture describes, but a worn collegiate hoodie.

The whole experience gave us a mere glimpse of what the actual scene must have been like. Still, there was something visceral about it. With everyone packed so tightly around Jesus, it was a wonder the woman could make her way to him and even more amazing that he would feel the faintest hint of her touch. Still, Jesus asks, "Who touched me?" and you can hardly blame Peter for what may well be a sarcastic response, "Master, the crowds are hemming you in and pressing against you." In other words, "what do you *mean*, 'who touched me?' *Everyone* is touching you."

But there's something different about the woman's touch. Something distinguishes her from the crowds. She may not be right next to Jesus, but she is somehow proximate. Who knows what she expected would happen or how she thought Jesus would respond, but when her fingers

finally make contact, here's what strikes me most about her response: "she saw that she could not remain hidden."

She could not remain hidden. In a crowd of countless people demanding Jesus' attention, when she barely brushes up against him, the woman cannot remain hidden. Jesus feels the power go out from him, almost as the power has been leaving her in her twelve years of bleeding, and he notices. In her pain and isolation, her desperation and shame, as in her fleeting faithfulness, she cannot remain hidden. Jesus doesn't just see her; he *feels* her, and now it seems she couldn't hide even if she wanted to.

When Jesus calls the woman out in front of the crowd, he's not trying to embarrass her but to ensure that she cannot remain hidden before her community any more than she can before him. He may not say it outright, but by healing the woman in the presence of others, he's admonishing them against ostracizing her any longer. Jesus doesn't just heal her physically but also restores her to the life of the community. He sees her, and finally they do, too.

The woman's story bears some similarity to today's Old Testament Lesson, the one Ben read earlier. Do you remember what happens? It's a long story, but the prophet Elijah tries to resolve his problems by hiding in a cave. He's days into the wilderness, far away from any form of civilization, but the Lord still comes looking for him. Rather than overpowering Elijah with wind, earthquake, or fire, God draws near in the sound of silence and simply asks: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" So, he could not remain hidden either. The Lord seeks him out in his despair and calls him back to the community.



Together, these stories make me think that today's sermon might be better off with another title, not so much about how we get close to God, but about how God gets close to us. Even when we are running in the opposite direction, even when it's all we can muster to brush the bottom of God's coat, God like a loving grandmother almost seems to ask, "Can you still feel me hugging you?" So, we cannot remain hidden. There's a "no-matter-what"-ness to God's nearness, even when we can't seem to feel it, a proximity that will not be denied.

As we'll hear reflected in much of today's music, the psalmist says, "surely goodness and mercy *shall follow me*"—not "goodness and mercy shall run ahead of me" or even "goodness and mercy shall be waiting for me" but "goodness and mercy *shall follow me*—all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." We cannot stay hidden, though we may try. Despite all our distractions and despair and notions that we can make it on our own, God is proximate, pursuing us with a love that will not let us go.

That's good news for you, for me, and for all of us, so thanks be to God. Amen.