

# Kate Amoss: Jigsaw Jesus

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## Jigsaw Jesus

Somehow this sermon acquired the title of Jigsaw Jesus. I got back from the beach late yesterday afternoon. Most of the week we had a thousand-piece puzzle set up on a card table. It was an underwater image of two manatees and most of the puzzle pieces were the same grayish tint of sea green. For some reason I couldn't pull myself away from it and every time I would be sitting and working on it, someone would announce that Kate was busy working on her sermon. It started as a joke but in a funny sort of way it became true. I will let you judge for yourself.

As you know, Celebration Circle is introducing a new communion liturgy next week. We are including a new element of compassionate touch in the worship. Following our confession, we will be adding a healing ritual of anointing the palms of one another's hands with oil. [Demonstrate] We wanted to rewrite the communion liturgy because we were yearning for a liturgy that would engage us at a deeper level than the one we already had. We wanted more of our senses to be involved. We each expressed in our own way a longing for a way of feeling ourselves to be ever more fully the body of Christ. I know that I began with a vague thirsting and hungering for something more tactile and healing in our service. I wanted my experience of being connected to this community during communion to be more literal and less abstract.

The ritual of anointing with oil and compassionate touch has a long history in the church. The word Christ is derived from the Greek word, *chrien*, which means to anoint or to rub oil on

someone or something. In Biblical tradition, the act of anointing had several important uses. It was used to heal the sick or wounded, to prepare a body for burial, as well as to consecrate kings, priests, and temple objects. The twenty-third psalm suggests the central importance that the experience of anointing had for the early Jews:

*Thou preparest a table before me  
in the presence of mine enemies:  
thou anointest my head with oil;  
my cup runneth over.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life:*

The experience of being anointed is a joyful one. The oil is the oil of gladness. Thou anointest my head with oil – my cup runneth over. It is a direct experience of human and divine love. The life of Jesus and his disciples is filled with images of this kind of caring and compassionate touch.

So the twelve disciples went out and preached that people should turn away from their sins. They drove out many demons, and rubbed oil on many sick people and healed them. (Mark 6:12-13)

When Jesus had gone indoors, the two blind men came to him, and he asked them, "Do you believe that I can heal you?" "Yes sir, they answered. Then Jesus touched their eyes and said, "Let it happen just as you believe." (Matt. 9:28-29)

They crossed the lake and came to the land at Genesaret, where the people recognized Jesus. So they sent for the sick people in all the surrounding country and brought them to Jesus. They begged him to let the sick at least touch the edge of his cloak; and all who touched were made well. (Mark 14:34-36)

Some people brought children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and to pray for them, but the disciples scolded the people. Jesus said, "Let the children come to me because the kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these." He placed his hands on them and went away. (Matt 19: 13-15)

When Jesus came down from the hill, large crowds followed him. Then a man suffering from a dreaded skin disease came to him, knelt down before him, and said, "Sir, if you want to you can make me clean." Jesus reached out and touched him, "I do want to," he answered. "Be clean!" (Matt. 8:1-3)

Jesus went to Peter's house and there he saw Peter's mother-in-law sick in bed with a fever. He touched her hand and the fever left her. (Matt. 8:14-15)

A Jewish official came to Jesus knelt down before him, "My daughter has died. Come and place your hands on her and she will live." (Matt. 9:18-19)

As Jesus went along, the people were crowding him from every side. Among them was a woman who had suffered from severe bleeding for twelve years; she had spent all she had on doctors but no one had been able to cure her. She came up in the crowd behind Jesus and touched the edge of his cloak, and her bleeding stopped at once. Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" Everyone denied it, and Peter said, "Master, the people are all around you and crowding in on you." But Jesus said, "Someone touched me for I knew it when the power went out of me." The woman saw that she had been found out, so she came trembling and threw herself at Jesus' feet. There in front of everyone she told him why she had touched him and how she had been healed at once. Jesus said to her, "My daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace." (Luke 8:42-48)

Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon...While Jesus was eating, a woman came in with an alabaster jar full of a very expensive perfume made of pure nard (an oil widely used for healing and soothing in the ancient world). She broke the jar and poured the perfume on Jesus' head. Some of the people there became angry and said to one another, "What was the use of wasting the perfume? It could have been sold for more than three hundred silver coins and the money given to the poor! And they criticized her harshly. But Jesus said, "Leave her alone! Why are you bothering her? She had done a fine and beautiful thing for me. You will always have poor people with you, and any time you want to, you can help them. But you will not always have me. She did what she could; she poured perfume on my body to prepare it ahead of time for burial. Now, I assure you that wherever the gospel is preached all over the world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." (Mark 14:3-9)

So Jesus rose from the table, took off his outer garment, and tied a towel around his waist. Then he poured some water into a washbasin and began to wash the disciples' feet and dry them with the towel around his waist. He came to Simon Peter who said to him, "Are you going to wash my feet, Lord?" Jesus answered him, "You do not understand now what I am doing, but you will understand later." Peter declared, "Never at any time will you wash my feet!" "If I do not wash your feet," Jesus answered, "you will no longer be my disciple." (John 13:4-8)

Throughout the gospel, Jesus touches and is touched. Compassionate touch is central to his ministry. He touched children and women as well as men. He touched untouchables. He even touched feet. He shocked his disciples. "Never at any time will you wash my feet!" says Peter. His touch led to physical healing and spiritual well being. Jesus was aware of himself as a physical healer as is shown in the story of the

woman who touched the edge of his cloak: "He felt the power drain out of him." When Jesus taught the good news, his touch was as an important part of the message as were his words.

When I hear these stories, I feel very close to Jesus and very far at the same time. The warmth of his hands reaching out to me through the millennium has an immediacy that his stories about tax collectors, Pharisees, and publicans do not. Touch is a universal language. But at the same time, I feel very distant as well. The integration of body, mind, and spirit that Jesus modeled seems to belong to another distant, long-ago simpler time – a time before healing became so sophisticated, a time that seems almost naïve. I cannot imagine a leader like Jesus who is equally comfortable with touch and words. When we seek to imitate Christ, we rarely think of imitating his hands-on healing practices.

Yet when Christianity was first practiced, compassionate touch was central to its practices. Scholars such as Morton Kelsey, tell us that both anointing; and laying on of hands were widely practiced by the early Christians. Healing oil that had been blessed was brought home by the faithful to be used in their homes. Classical historian Peter Brown calls the early Christians constant attention to healing touch an "obsessive compassion." When these people established the first hospitals and hospices for the outcast sick and dying, they would welcome their new patients with a ritual bath and massage. The act of baptism for new initiates was a rich tactile experience. The catechumenes, as they were called, would be anointed from head to toe both before and after being fully immersed in the baptismal waters. The ritual was considered to heal both body and spirit. Ongoing rituals of anointing were as important in the Christian experience as was the feast of the Eucharist.

This began to change in the West after 800 AD. As the church became increasingly hierarchical, the meaning of touch in worship took on a different significance. Popes conferred

power to bishops through touch who would in turn confer power to priests. Zach Thomas in his book, *Healing Touch, the Church's Forgotten Language*, called this new kind of touch, "power touch." The use of healing oils in homes disappeared. The church claimed that its role was to save souls not to heal the body. The body was too low in the hierarchy. With the loss of healing touch, compassion was drained from the church. By the thirteenth century, the hands of Christians who had at one time given massages and ritual baths to heal and convert now operated the grisly instruments of torture to harm and control.

The Reformation challenged the importance of the priests in mediating the divine but it only reinforced the dominance of the intellect in religion. Ideas were more important than lived experience. Words became more important than touch. Protestant churches minimized physical contact. Our liturgies at Seekers have developed from this tradition. This is what is familiar and safe to most of us. I know that I feel some ambivalence about including more touch in our worship. The words of touch are highly charged, rarely neutral. Listen to these words and feel for yourself how visceral your response to them is: grope, manipulate, finger, paw, beat, strike, caress, pet, stroke, pat, kiss. Touch is the most immediate of our senses. It is the first to develop. Fetuses of six weeks are sensitive to touch. And it is the last to fade. Touch is the only sense that becomes more acute as we age. Our souls connect one to another through touch. Touch creates and destroys relationships. Physical abuse and sexual abuse, both so terribly damaging to the psyches of children, are abuses of touch. Jesus was betrayed by touch, the kiss of Judas. At the same time, nothing is more life giving than an experience of healthy touch. We can only come to know ourselves as incarnate beings through the sensations of our skin.

Without positive and on-going knowledge of touch, we remain

separate pieces of a puzzle. Our small dabs of color and our random lines stay meaningless. We never fit together with one another to create the picture that we are intended to create. Touch can connect us and ground us. Touch builds community. Touch can also help us appreciate our own uniqueness. Just as the particular bumps, curves, and indentations of each puzzle piece remain unknown and unimportant if they do not interact with other puzzle pieces, so it is with our individual attributes. A puzzle is not an intellectual pursuit. It is full of trial and error. The puzzle pieces must be picked up, put down, turned this way and that in order to be put together. Puzzle pieces are real. They have definite shapes and boundaries. They take up space in a distinct way. So do we. Touch teaches us that we are real.

Healthy, life-giving touching demands a high level of consciousness of our motives and intentions. Zach Thomas suggests that we must learn to reconnect our hand and our heart. A hands-off Christianity has split our bodies from our feelings. Compassion no longer flows through us. It does not flow like water. Our spiritual energy becomes backed up in our heads. When words are more important than actions, our actions become distorted, dry, and desert like. In the Old Testament scripture for today, we are told of the story of Moses asking God for water in the Wilderness. In this story, the Hebrew people are filled with doubt and distrust. They are thirsty and their throats are parched. God names their encampments Massah and Meribah, Hebrew words for doubt and testing. Just as the hearts of the Hebrews have become hard, rocky, and inhospitable to God so has the Wilderness in which they find themselves become hard, rocky and inhospitable to them. Moses begs God for help. He is told by God to strike a rock with his rod and water will flow. Water flows from a stone and once again the Hebrews are filled with faith and trust in God. The outer life reflects the inner life. This is how it is for us as well.

In this story, Moses enacts a ritual. He takes his rod and touches a stone. Water flows once again in the desert. Ritual can help us mend our hand-heart split as well. We must remember what we once knew and have forgotten. An outer physical activity can reshape inner life. I want you to try an experiment. Take one hand and slap the back of your other hand. How do you feel about yourself as you do that? Now I want you to take the same hand and gently caress the back of your other hand. Has your feeling about yourself changed? Jesus knew this. He left us with specific actions to keep our faith alive. Do this in remembrance of me. We are told to wash feet. Share bread and wine. And we are told to remember and honor the woman with the alabaster jar who anointed Jesus before the last supper. As psychologist Paul Pryser noted, "Movements and gestures are psychodynamically so closely interwoven with emotions that attempts at performing the proper motion are very likely to stimulate the corresponding emotion." Careful attention to gestures of caring touch can help our stony hearts flow with compassion again. As Jesus said in John 7:37, "For those who believe in me, streams of life-giving water will pour out from their hearts." An act of caring touch is life changing. It is distinct and memorable. It is very much like the feeling one has when miraculously two pieces of a difficult jigsaw puzzle fit together. I would like to invite you to hold one another's hands as I read you Psalm 23. Try experimenting a little bit until your hands join together like two pieces of a puzzle.

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

*The Lord maketh me to lie down in green pastures;*

*And leadeth me beside still waters and restoreth my soul:*

*The Lord leadeth me in the paths of righteousness.*

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,*

*I will fear no evil for thou art with me;*

*thy rod and thy staff comfort me.*

*Thou preparest a table before me*

*in the presence of mine enemies:*



*thou anointest my head with oil;*

*my cup runneth over.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my  
life:*

*and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*