

PERSONAL SPACE
Sermon for Pentecost 16B-Mk 8:27-38
LPC, 9/6/15

I was thinking about “personal space” the other day and decided to look it up to see when this concept entered the sphere of common knowledge. The phrase, apparently, was coined by an anthropologist named Edward T. Hall in the mid-1960’s, to refer to the space people try to maintain between themselves and other people. This distance seems to be culturally conditioned. Westerners, for example like to be at least two feet away from other people. People in other cultures prefer a greater distance, others, less.

This can be a source of discomfort when people from two different cultures meet. I remember an acquaintance who had been a missionary from some conservative sect that required males to maintain a distance of arm’s-length from females. Sent to Latin America, he nearly died from embarrassment when women wanted to stand closer to converse. They weren’t being forward, that was just their way.

I suspect few of us would be able to describe to the centimeter exactly what our personal space is, but I suspect we all know when it’s been violated. I personally am claustrophobic. I don’t mind standing close to one person so much but when I’m in a densely packed crowd I hyperventilate.

By instinct, most of us see a forced compromise of our personal space as a personal threat, and often with good reason. It is well documented that many people who have been sexually assaulted feel so violated that they can no longer bear physical intimacy even with friends and family.

In a book I’ve just read, one of the characters is brutally raped while in prison. Pressed to describe his pain he says, “It’s as though everyone has a small place inside themselves, maybe, a private bit that they keep to themselves. It’s like a little fortress, where the most private part of you lives.... You don’t show that bit of yourself to anyone, usually, unless sometimes to someone that you love greatly.... Now, it’s like ... my own fortress has been blown up with gunpowder.”

No wonder we protect our personal space!

At the same time, there are people we admit into our personal space, and sometimes these are people we don’t even know well, or with whom our relationship is quite formal—people like doctors, or masseurs, or nail technicians. We allow these people privilege with our bodies because they are doing something helpful for us, like healing us, or making us beautiful.

It would appear that completely enclosed within our personal space is a healing space, into which we allow people to enter for healing purposes, even if they are strangers. But we have to trust them first.

Jesus was a person who entered people’s personal space all the time, and today we hear a story of pronounced physical intimacy with someone he apparently did not even know

beforehand. Granted the personal space standards of first-century Palestine may have been different from our own, but I doubt that even then it was usual for a complete stranger to put his fingers in your ears or to (shudder) apply his spittle to your tongue. But these intimate interactions are the means of this man's healing.

Jesus was a toucher. There were times that he healed remotely, as in the preceding story where he heals the woman's daughter even though the daughter is not present. But there are plenty of times when Jesus is very physical, well beyond the limits of accepted social behavior. He applies mud to a blind man's eyes. He takes a little girl by the hand to raise her from the dead. (Bear in mind that touching the dead made an observant Jew ritually unclean.) He seems to welcome the touch of strange women. Scandalous!

What is true in all these cases is that Jesus invades people's personal space in order to make them well.

Although Jesus is no longer physically among us the way he was in first-century Palestine, I believe that he is still invading people's personal space in order to make them well. In the cases of which I am speaking, the personal space is often inside, rather than outside. In order to heal Jesus enters our intellectual space, our emotional space, the interior spaces of our values and our assumptions.

And some of us defend these interior spaces passionately, even though it's Jesus who wants access. An example would be someone who wants to follow Jesus, but considers his job, or his money, or his tax return or what he eats and drinks to be no one's business but his own. This is what most of us do, but as long as there are areas of our lives that we keep off-limits, Jesus' ability to heal us is limited.

Often we are not even conscious of the interior space we close off from Jesus and his ability to heal. For example, I'd always considered tithing, giving away 10% of household income to church and charity, to be unrealistic for a modern American family. One day, and this was when our income actually dropped sharply and we were more than ever dependent on God's mercy, the defenses fell. I came to consider that maybe I was rationalizing, protecting myself, and that if I let God into this part of my life that I considered inviolate that I might somehow be healed in some small way. Once I tried it, I found that tithing is indeed a healing thing to do.

My point is that to be healed a person must make himself or herself vulnerable in some way. This, like so much else having to do with Christianity, is deeply countercultural. But we do it already when we want to be physically healed. We remove our protective clothing in the examining room. We permit ourselves to be anaesthetized for a necessary surgery. We submit to uncomfortable treatments. To be physically healed we allow others to invade our personal space.

To be spiritually healed, the same is true. We need to allow Jesus to invade our interior space. As with physical healing and personal space, it's all about trust. But believe me, Jesus we can trust.