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The Rev. Kate Byrd

### Creature Comforts

Who here had or has a special teddy bear, blanket, or stuffed toy of any form when you were a child. I had two bears, both named Bobby Bear (alliteration was a thing at that age), who (if I were to be honest with you) stayed with me all the way through college and into seminary. Until I got married and thought it might be odd to cuddle with two thread barren bears, a husband and soon after two dogs and from time to time one or more of our three babies. Still I vividly remember how comforting it was to climb into bed at night, especially if I was in an unfamiliar or new place, and grab my Bobby Bears, to breathe in deep their unique and soothing smell. As I would lay down with one under my head and another in my arms, allowing me to feel a sense of comfort and safety and maybe even love.

In one of my favorite podcasts, Hidden Brain, the host, Shanker Vedantam, actually shared a story about his co-worker, Alison Macadam's, who still holds close to her own comfort object. A woman of 40, happily married with children, and a successful career, Macadam curls up every night with her own thread barren blanky, or as she calls it baba. An editor in residence at NPR, Macadam described how when she buries her nose in the cool comfort of her baby blanket and breathes in deeply it too smells like comfort. And, while you might think her own husband would be weirded out by the fact that his spouse still cuddles up every night with a soft inanimate object, he doesn't. In fact, when she is gone and he longs for her he will reach over to her side of the bed, grab baba and uses it for his own snuggle time. So, what's so special about these cloth companions, these thread baren comforters? Why do little ones cling to them so tight, and grown NPR editors await their embrace at the end of a long day?

Mark notes this same desire for connection and wholeness, this deep need for comfort and safety by way of touch in our Gospel today, as we hear the story of the synagogue leader, Jairus', sick daughter, and the hemorrhaging woman. Two individuals, who at first glance appear to have nothing in common, but in fact are far more alike than meets the eye. As they both are seemingly lost causes. I mean let's face it we have a twelve year old girl, who, as Jairus tells us, is so sick she barely lives. As he calls out to Jesus, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." Even more, as our story goes on, someone comes from his daughter's bedside to relay to Jesus and Jairus, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?" Then there is our hemorrhaging woman who has lost over a decade of her childbearing years to a debilitating condition that has left her without funds, without help, and seemingly without hope. As we are told, "She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse."

When Vedantam first heard Alison MacAdam's story of her baba, he recalled a book written by Pulitzer winning author and investigative journalist, Deborah Blum, entitled "Love at Goon Park." Here Blum explored "the powerful role that touch plays in our lives." As she covered the controversial history of Harry Harlow, the groundbreaking 1950's psychologist who studied attachment and affection. Through his research with primates Harlow disproved popular psychological theories of his time, which included dangerous assumptions such as mothers should not cuddle their infants and should avoid physical contact as much as possible lest they wanted to ruin the moral fiber of their children. And while his research was truly found by accident it became groundbreaking none the less. As Harlow and his team began setting up

their primate colony, they used cloth diapers as soft cushion for the baby monkey's cages, soon discovering every time they attempted to change an old dirty cloth for a new clean one, the monkeys would cling with to old cloth with such ferocity and concern that the scientists started to take notice. And so Harlow began to research the connection between the baby monkeys and the cloth objects, as he created two "Mom's" molded out of wire, one who held milk and the other who was covered in soft cuddly cloth. As scientists offered the "mom's" they discovered that time and time again the baby monkeys would choose the comforting "care" of the cloth mom over and above the food from the wire mom. So much so in fact that the baby monkeys would cling to the cloth mom while craning their necks to try and drink from the wire mom's milk never leaving the embrace of the cloth mom. It seems crazy to think that scientific studies had to be conducted to prove that our basic human need is for connection through affectionate touch and love. But, Harlow was seeking to prove that mothers, previously thought to only be necessary as a food source for their children, were meant to hold and cuddle and love their babies. And more so, that we as human beings were created for the same thing. We were made to love and be loved.

As the hemorrhaging woman comes to Jesus in the city she knows if she can but touch the fringes of his garment she would have just enough contact with him to be healed. Because she wanted and even had faith in the fact that to touch Jesus was more than simply to be in physical contact with him, but to enter into a real and intimate relationship with the Divine. Which is why as soon as she grabbed the hem of his robe, caressed it with her hand, felt the soft fibers of its worn edges between her fingertips like the beloved threads of a well worn and loved blankie she was immediately connected, healed, and given new life. It is also why Jesus exclaims "Who touched my clothes?" A seemingly ludacris question in an over crowded street, but a valid one all the same. Because her touch was not just any touch, but a true reach and a grasp for something like the healing power of connection and love. In the same way as Jesus comes to the little girl at her deathbed he finds her surrounded by a community of support and love. One that has gathered to uphold those who cannot hold themselves up. Which allows Jesus' touch to become more than simply a hand on her shoulder, but more like an extension of that community and their support, as the simple power of his touch ignites within her the spark of life and brings her back into the embrace and love of her community.

As Harry Harlow proved in his strange studies or maybe more so as Mark points out in his Gospel passage we were created for connection. That is why, just like the baby monkeys who clung to the cloth mom, we love our own teddy bears and babas that bring us consistent affection and care. More so it is why Jarius goes to find the one who can heal his daughter by the laying on of hands, and why the hemorrhaging woman goes to but touch the cloak of the one who exclaims to her and to us, "Daughter (son) your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your dis-ease." How much more might we find wholeness, and even comfort from our dis-ease if we could lean into all the ways we can reach out to connect to others, ourselves, and our God? It can be as simple, I believe, as grasping our teddy bears and blankies, even just grabbing ourselves in a loving embrace. It can also be as big as asking to hold the hand of someone in need, or sharing an embrace with a loved one, or even taking part in our healing ministry and laying on of hands on the first Sunday of the month. Whatever it is, I pray it allows you to remember you were made for connection, for wholeness, and for love, and you deserve to go in peace and be relieved of whatever dis-ease you may carry as you reach out and touch the Divine that is at the center of us all!