

Critics have labeled it a typical and simplistic “fish out of water” story but some of us who aren’t so critical have a fondness for the movie *Miss Congeniality*. While it certainly won’t leave you lost in deep thoughts or riled up in righteous indignation for days, it is a touching tale of compassion that will make you laugh, and laughter can be healing. For those of you who are not familiar with the movie, it’s the story of a female FBI agent appropriately named Grace Hart who takes pride in her job and at the same time struggles to bring empathy to an otherwise stereotypical hard boiled, male dominated federal government crime solving department. When a serial bomber threatens a beauty pageant, the agent the FBI chooses to send in undercover to the pageant is none other agent Grace Hart. The humor in the movie comes from Agent Hart’s disdain for beauty pageants and all its trappings while being forced to be in one. Grace had worked hard to get where she was in the FBI and things like evening gowns, high heeled shoes, makeup, saying all she wants is “world peace”, and other beauty tropes were not part of her life. With the help of the pageant staff and the FBI, Grace is outwardly transformed into a dazzling beauty who can compete with the women representing their states for the crown of Miss United States.

Throughout the story, Grace is constantly in her own wilderness- she doesn’t really belong in the pageant world and clearly doesn’t want to belong. Despite her sarcastic comments, the contestants accept and welcome her. Eventually their acceptance does something to Grace. When a red herring convinces the FBI to leave the pageant early, Grace insists that is the wrong move and someone needs to stay behind and protect the people involved in the pageant. When her request is denied, Grace turns in her badge and stays behind on her own, a powerful display of her conviction and willingness to come to harm in order to protect others.

And, spoiler alert, Grace was right. She was able to save her friends and caught the person responsible. Just when we think the movie is over, Grace is called to a special final meeting of the pageant contestants where she discovered they had voted her Miss Congeniality – the coolest, nicest girl at the pageant. The speech Grace gives is my favorite of all the dialogue in the movie: “I never thought anything like this would happen to me. I kind of hoped it wouldn’t. But now that is has, I just want to say that I’m very honored, and moved, and truly touched.”

From her speech it is clear that something inwardly and deeply transformative happened while we were laughing at the humor in the movie. The pageant participants were touched by Grace's courage, persistence, and dedication to protect them. And Grace was touched by their acceptance. It's clear she no longer thinks less of these beauty pageant contestants, she loves them.

That is why her name is so appropriate: Grace Hart. Her character embodies the transformation of God's grace in our lives through love. When Grace Hart said she was truly touched, her experience was similar to what the author of Mark's Gospel was describing in the Gospel reading today.

If you are familiar with Gospel of Mark, then you probably noticed there are two events missing from our reading today. They happen to be two really big important miracles of Jesus. So, we might wonder why the lectionary committee chose to omit them from today's section of Mark's Gospel. Surely big important miracles like feeding thousands and walking on water make for engaging and dramatic sermons, Bible studies, and personal reflections. Or perhaps, such big miracles aren't the only ways Jesus exhibits the power of God. Perhaps those big important miracles can distract us from the other ways, perhaps even more impactful ways, God's grace is at work in the world.

To recognize it, we must look a little more closely at today's Gospel: the bits around the big miracles. They seem to point to Jesus' relationship with the crowds of people that recognized him and his disciples and were, at this point in the Gospel, following them everywhere they went.

Today's Gospel starts with the return of the disciples from their mission. Remember, Jesus sent them out two by two with just the clothes on their backs, the shoes on their feet and their walking sticks in their hands to go and teach about Jesus. Now they were back and told Jesus where they had been, what they had seen, and what they taught. Jesus responded by giving them the lesson to go to the wilderness and rest. We also heard many people recognized them and went after them, so that a quiet get away seemed impossible. There are lots of sermons and reflections about how important it is to rest and how sometimes we need to switch plans and rest at other times inspired by this reading, but today let's pay attention to how Jesus reacted to the crowds at this point in the Gospel.

We heard he had compassion on them because they seemed lost and without a leader. However, the term "sheep without a shepherd" is an Old Testament term that indicated not an absence of a leader or ruler, but the suffering poor leadership can cause. Poor leadership in the Old Testament was any leader who did not love people in the same way God loves people. In the Old Testament there are stories of God calling leaders like Moses and David (both of

whom worked as shepherds before fulfilling their callings). Even though they are remembered as Israel's greatest leaders, they didn't always do the right thing, they made mistakes, but God responded by forgiving them because God loves them. And they were contrite after their mistakes and changed their ways and tried to reflect God's love and grace, even when the people they were leading didn't make it easy for them. People can tell the difference between leaders making mistakes and leaders not caring for their welfare. When the people observed their leaders' actions showed they cared more about collecting taxes and forcing conformity, or fearing they would lose power or influence, the people also noticed individuals, families, and communities suffered physically, spiritually, and economically. This is what sheep without a shepherd meant: it didn't mean there wasn't leadership, it meant there wasn't caring, empathetic leadership.

Which is what Jesus seemed to have observed in today's Gospel. Jesus responded to his observation with compassion. Compassion is a word that means "to suffer with", and in the New Testament is a word that means to feel that suffering deep in one's gut. In other words, Jesus did not feel pity for the people in the crowd. He didn't feel sorry for them. He most likely felt something better described as disturbed, perhaps offended. We could say Jesus was deeply touched by the suffering of the crowd.

Touch features prominently in the last part of today's Gospel reading where people were bringing the sick to Jesus wherever he went in the belief that Jesus would heal them if he touched them or if they could touch the hem of his clothing. We read that all who he touched were healed.

Being touched seems to be a theme in today's Gospel. Just like in the movie *Miss Congeniality*, this type of touch is not physical nor insignificant. It is an embodiment of God's love at work in the world. The word translated *touch* in today's Gospel does not mean physical contact. It means to influence, transform, alter.

And if we step back for a moment and reflect there is something marvelous in these two bits of Mark's Gospel that we might have missed if they hadn't been brought together for us. We might have missed the relationship of grace Jesus has with people and the people with Jesus. They both touched each other, they both influenced each other.

That might be even more vital to understanding who Jesus is and who God is than the miracles of feeding thousands and walking on water. Because this shows us God is not impervious, cold, nor immovable. God is touched by our suffering. So often I hear people curse and blame God for suffering but rarely is there anything to substantiate that in scriptures. Not when we look at seemingly

insignificant parts of scripture like our Gospel reading today, which suggests God observes the ways we hurt one another. And God responds with something deeper than pity or disappointment. God responds the same way Jesus did: feeling something we might describe as offense or being disturbed that the author of the Gospel summed up in the word compassion. Through Jesus, God suffers all the injustices and humiliations with those who suffer. Which also means, by the way, God observes and is touched by our joys.

This is the God Jesus embodies, the God who is not so much the cold, hard boiled power of governments like the ancient Roman Empire but is the God of overflowing love.

Today's Gospel also shows us how God's Kingdom is planted and grows here on earth. When we are vulnerable enough to be touched by and to touch others, not physically, but the way the fictional character Grace Hart was, something deeply transformative that looks like God's Kingdom can happen. Once she lowered her defenses, Grace saw through the superficial to the hearts and souls of the women in the pageant and they saw her. Grace wasn't a beauty queen, but she didn't have to be to love them and for them to love her.

That's what God's love can do. It can show us the best and worst in the world and each other and it can help us see life lived in one another shoes, as it were. This is empathy. It is a form of grace. And it has the capability to breach or bridge divisions.

We don't need to be reminded of how naive or silly it might sound to say, like the beauty pageant contestants, that they want world peace when we are achingly familiar with the divisions in our community, country, families, and the world. Sometimes I wonder if we mistake differences for division – like Grace Hart did with beauty pageant contestants. Sometimes I wonder if we look at differences like age or gender or gender identity or race or physical or mental condition or education or economic status or political affiliation through the lens of fear which can lead to distain and division. That is the opposite of what today's Gospel is about, and why we need reminders of what God's love is capable of.

While it is true that as individuals and even as a parish, we can't change the world through big miracles to make it look like and behave like what we want it to, we can practice the love of God in Christ we have been touched by.

We can listen. We can observe. We can share with others. It's not easy. And we could be rejected. But we could be part of the deeply transformative stuff of God's Kingdom here on earth. Or as fans of *Miss Congeniality* might say it: how else can we hope for world peace?