

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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“The Power of Touch”

Mark 1:40-45 (NRSV)

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, "If you choose, you can make me clean." [41] Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean!" [42] Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. [43] After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, [44] saying to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." [45] But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

CALLED TO HUG

I have a friend, a female minister who is a “hugger.” I’m not sure if “hugger” is a real word, but that’s what she is. She hugs practically everyone she meets, and you can tell by the look in her eyes that her hug is an expression of pure grace. It is an extension of her love of God, and her unconditional love for you. I would even say that her hugs can heal.

Now I must admit that I’m a little more reserved when it comes to hugging. I know that some people have a problem with hugs, and we live in a time when a hug at the wrong time and place could be misunderstood.

But, using my friend as an example, I have come to believe that hugging is an essential part of what I am called to do. If they ever decide to quit call us ministers of the Word and Sacrament perhaps that should call us the “huggers in chief” or something like that.

And I think that you are also called to lead in this way. Those who are being installed as officers today are being installed as “lead huggers.” You are being installed to lead the congregation in the ministry of affection and touch.

Now don’t misunderstand. I know that some of you guys aren’t the touchy feely types. It would seem unusual for you to try and convert yourself into a hugger. Not everyone has the gift of hugs, and as I said, not everyone appreciates the gift of hugs. But, I think that people understand what we mean when we approach them with a hugging attitude.

I come from West Virginia and not too many guys from West Virginia are huggers. We think that men should be the strong, independent silent type. We believe in football and the strong square jaw! Hugging is women’s work.

THE TOUCH OF JESUS

But, I've come here this morning to tell you that hugging is the work of everyone who would follow Christ. No, I'm not (as some of you guys might think) a closet disciple of Oprah. I'm a disciple of Jesus Christ. And when I look at the life of Christ, touch plays a big role in his ministry.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who gently guides his sheep. He picks up the lost sheep and carries it home. He knows his sheep by name and is willing to lay down his life for the sheep. (John 10:11-14)

Jesus is the one who touches and blesses the little children. This was his vision of the kingdom of God. (Mark 10:13-15). And as we read in today's lesson and many other passages Jesus is the one who heals with a touch.

Last week we talked about the fact that Jesus could have healed at a distance, and in some cases he did. But, most of the time he healed up close and personal ... with a touch and a hand up.

Now it's one thing to lovingly touch friends and family and church members, but it is quite another to put our arms around those who are not so lovable. This is where the ministry of Jesus becomes a great challenge.

Jesus not only touched family and friends. Jesus touched outsiders. He touched sinners and tax collectors and even ate with them. He loved his enemies and blessed those who cursed him.

He touched the untouchables.

That's what happens in our lesson for today. Jesus reached out and touched an untouchable. He touched a leper and made him whole.

LEPROSY AND FEAR

It is hard for us to understand the impact this story would have had in the ancient world. We now have a better knowledge of leprosy (Hansen's disease) and how to treat it. But, that was not true in Jesus' day. Before the advent of modern medicine leprosy was a death sentence. Lepers were forced to make their living by begging and were separated totally from family and friends.

Often leprosy was misdiagnosed and people who merely had skin problems were treated as if they had leprosy. It didn't make any difference if you actually had the disease or not. If you looked like a leper you were treated like a leper. You were forcibly removed from society until your death or until you could prove that you were "clean."

It was an extremely lonely and frightening experience.

More than this, there was a moral stigma imposed upon lepers. People reasoned that if someone had something bad happen to them, they must have done something to deserve it. This was a common theological assumption in Jesus' day.

You might remember a story from the Bible when Jesus and his disciples came across a man who was born blind. The disciples asked Jesus, "Who sinned—the man or his parents?" In Jesus' day sin supposedly caused sickness. People got what they deserved.

So lepers were not only shunned because of their illness; they were also shunned because they were thought to be morally corrupt.

TOUCHING THE LEPER

Lepers, the unclean were supposed to keep their distance from everyone who was clean. But, in today's lesson that barrier is broken. The leper comes, kneels at Jesus' feet and begs for healing. He says, "If you choose, you can make me clean!"

This is the first thing that would have shocked the ancient audience. A leper coming that close to anyone was cause for alarm. Jesus would have been well within his rights to say, "You know the law. You know that you're not supposed to come this close to me. Go away."

But, Jesus didn't choose to do that. Jesus didn't respond in that way. The Bible tells us that Jesus was moved with pity or compassion by the plight of this man. Actually that is too weak a translation. The word really means that his stomach was tied in knots. He literally had a gut reaction to what he saw.

Everyone else would have run away from the leper out of fear. Jesus reached out and touched him. Touching a person with leprosy was a big no—no.

Touching a leper carried potential risk for Jesus—not only from the disease but also from the rejection overly judgmental religious leaders. Touching a leper made a person ceremonially unclean. You would be ostracized from society until you could prove that you were okay. Touching the leper potentially made Jesus a leper.

If I were doing a movie about this passage I would have the people gasp and avert their gaze as Jesus touches the leper.

I would have a significant proportion of the crowd leave in disgust saying things like, "Can you believe he touched that man who was disfigured by leprosy? That was gross ... and immoral. Surely he can't be from God if he does something like that?"

These people would leave early, and they would miss the miracle. But, a much reduced crowd would see more. The leper that Jesus touched would be made clean.

I take that phrase “made clean” to mean that not only was the leper healed he was given a physical and moral face lift. The man who was as good as dead was literally resurrected by the power of Jesus’ touch. Indeed, in the minds of the people the only thing Jesus could do that was more powerful than this would be to raise the dead.

THE MEANING OF THE MIRACLE

We could say, “Well Jesus could touch a leper because ... well, he was Jesus. But, we’re not. We can’t do things like that. We’re not that powerful. We don’t have that kind of faith.”

There’s a certain amount of truth to that. I have a hard time embracing the outcast. I have a hard time touching those that society says we shouldn’t touch. Besides, many of those untouchables don’t want our touch. Maybe that is a job for Jesus.

But, remember that the miracles of Jesus are always done for a reason. What does this story teach us about Jesus and about us? I think it teaches us that we could probably touch more people than we do. The question is: are we willing? Jesus was willing, but are we?

I think I may have told you about the time I was serving as volunteer chaplain in North Carolina. I was called to the bedside of a young man who had AIDS. His partner was in the room with him, and the look on his face told me that time might be short.

The young man with this disease told me about being rejected by his family and his church. They didn’t want to come near him. More than that, they thought that he was being punished for his lifestyle.

This was when the AIDS epidemic was just getting started and the medical personnel were extremely cautious since we didn’t really know how the disease was spread. They were afraid to touch him. He said that he missed human touch more than anything else.

When it came time to leave I took his hand and gripped it tightly as I prayed. He understood, and he seemed to be comforted by the gesture. I never saw that young man again, but I came to appreciate these “leper” passages in a new way. Touching another in need really is an important part of ministry. And sometimes touching another can even be an act of faith.

After that night I began to think about others that needed to be touched. It seemed to me that leprosy is not only a disease but a metaphor for anyone who is kept at arms length by society.

People who are handicapped, people from a different culture, people of a different religion, people who are bereaved, and people who are ill ... all of these and more can be kept at arm’s length by a society that fears them.

All of us are afraid to touch someone. We are not willing to reach out and touch some people because we are frightened. But, the Bible tells us that Jesus came to give us a perfect love that takes away our fear. (1 John 4:18) Jesus enables us to do what we cannot do on our own. The Spirit of Christ gives us a faith that is continually stretching us.

A TESTIMONY TO THE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES

Jesus went beyond touching the leper and making him whole. Jesus put the leper back in touch with the human community that had ostracized him. They made it official. They followed the letter of the law. Jesus told the man to show himself to the religious authorities (who doubled as the health department in those days) and tell them what happened.

The Scripture said that Jesus did this as a “testimony to them.” In other words, this action was more than a way to get the leper reinstated with society. It was a way to let the religious authorities know about Jesus.

Jesus was saying in effect, “Tell them that there’s a new power in this world, and the old rules no longer apply. The world can no longer be divided so neatly be clean and unclean, male and female, straight and gay, Christians and Muslims.

No longer is it your job to keep people at arm’s length and put limits on the grace of God. This healing illustrates that the grace of God knows no limits. There are no untouchables in the kingdom of God. Even the leper can be made whole.”

TELL NO ONE

There is one curious aspect to our lesson for today. Jesus wanted the healed leper to tell the priests what had happened as a testimony to them. But, Jesus didn’t want the leper to tell anyone else.

Why did Jesus say that? After all it seems to me that the word was already out due to the people who had just seen this miracle. And didn’t Jesus want people to know that there was a new power in the world that could make the leper clean?

Most commentators suggest that Jesus didn’t want the message overshadowed by the miracle. Jesus’ miracles are evidence of his power, but the miracles themselves do not adequately explain who he is and what he had come to proclaim. (I have found this is still true. When people concentrate too much on their desire for a miracle they tend to forget their even greater need for a Savior.)

THE PRICE OF TOUCHING AN UNTOUCHABLE

Whatever the reason for the command to silence, the leper doesn’t obey. He goes out and tells everyone. The man’s gratitude and joy just spilled over into witness.

And so all the people in the whole area learned what had happened, and they all sought Jesus. The result is that Jesus can't go into any of the towns. He is besieged by people wanting to be healed. And even when he stays in the country people come to him from all over.

It is ironic. The former leper is now free to go where he wants, but Jesus is now a leper of sorts ... isolated from the city and forced to stay in the countryside. Jesus paid a price for touching an untouchable. And eventually that path led to a cross.

If we dare to follow Christ and if we dare to touch the untouchables then there will be a price for us to pay as well. We will be affected by the anguish of those we touch. Miracles always come at a high price. Sometimes the pain rubs off.

It will require courage to follow Jesus and touch those untouchables. If you get angry at a world that has no heart, no compassion, there will be consequences for you.

TOUCHED BY GOD

But, touching others in the name of Christ can also be a great joy. Sometimes when we dare to touch, we will find that God touches us back.

My favorite story of what it means to touch a leper was told by Pastor Arnold Lovell. Arnold, when this happened was the pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church in Charleston, WV. He received a call to come to the home of some members who didn't attend very often. The husband had died, and Arnold was going to do the funeral.

While at the home, Arnold learned for the first time that the couple had a 42 year old son with severe disabilities. Doctors had earlier estimated his mental capacity to be that of a five year old. It was decided that the son would be unable to handle the death of his father so they didn't tell him.

About two weeks later Arnold got a second call. The mother had also died, and it was the pastor's task to explain this to the son. After consulting with a developmental disability expert and with much fear, the pastor went to the home to try and explain what happened to the may with a boy's mind.

He began, "Ronnie, you know that your father has been gone."

"Yes."

"Well, I'm afraid that I've got some bad news. He's dead."

Ronnie replied, "Daddy's dead. Yes, I know."

And then the pastor continued, "You know your mom has been sick."

"Yes. She's in the hospital."

"Ronnie, you mom is dead too."

At that Ronnie broke down and cried. He literally soaked the front of Arnold's shirt as Arnold held this man in his arms. Finally they got him settled down, and it was decided that Ronnie would go with Rev. Lovell to the funeral home the next day. Since Ronnie's reaction to his parent's death was so out of control, Arnold was more than a little concerned about what might happen.

Ronnie entered the funeral home, went straight over to the casket and said, "That's mommy's body."

"That's right Ronnie."

"She's not there any more. She's with Jesus."

The next day they drove out to the cemetery, just Ronnie and his pastor. Ronnie looked at the grave of his father and said, "Is that where they put daddy?"

"Yes."

And then he looked at the open pit next to his father's grave and said, "Is this where they are going to put mommy?"

"Yes."

And then he looked at the plot next to his father's grave and said, "Is this where they'll put me?"

"Yes. One day we all die Ronnie."

And that seemed to satisfy him.

On the way home Ronnie's spirits seemed to brighten as he listened to gospel music on the radio, and invited Rev. "Wovell" (as he called him) to come into the house and listen to his favorite record.

Arnold obliged and Ronnie put on the record. It was Elvis Pressley's version of "How Great Thou Art." Ronnie was enthralled with the music and sang along from time to time.

As the pastor listened to the words of that song and looked at Ronnie he found himself deeply moved by it all. He said, "God made the stars, the rolling thunder, the universe and a man named Ronnie ... who had the faith to praise God even in the most difficult of circumstances."

Arnold concluded his story by saying, "I reached out and touched a leper someone who had lost so much that nobody had the nerve to do anything. But, that leper touched me back and became for me the embodiment of Jesus Christ. And I was changed."

I head Arnold tell that story early in my career as a minister, and it has had a profound impact on how I understand ministry. Ministry is touching others in the name of Christ.

And sometimes when we reach out and touch we are touched by the Spirit of God in Christ. And the one who is healed is me.

That's the power of touch.
Amen.