

MATTHEW 8:1-4; 14-17

When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.” Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. Then Jesus said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded as a testimony to them.” ...

When Jesus entered Peter’s house, he saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. He touched her hand and the fever left her and she got up and began to serve him. That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons and he cast out the spirits with a word and cured all who were sick. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, “He took our infirmities and bore our disease.”

HOW TOUCHING!

Matthew 8:1-4; 14-17

How do you feel when you are touched? Now there is a question that offers a wide spectrum of possible answers. It depends, doesn’t it? It depends on who is doing the touching, under what circumstances it occurs, what mood we are in, what we perceive to be the intent—a multitude of factors will determine how we experience it. If a touch is erotic, it may qualify as the most enjoyable of human experiences. But it can also be hostile or violent and damage us both physically and emotionally. When touching occurs, the boundary between people has been crossed and some boundaries require passports—you had better have permission to enter no matter what your intent!

I learned this the hard way a number of years ago when I was a new official refereeing a girls’ junior high basketball game. I whistled a foul on a player and the table sounded the horn

to alert me that it was her fifth foul disqualifying her. I went over and trying my pastoral best to be caring and comforting, touched her lightly on the shoulder and gently informed her she would have to leave the game. She immediately turned on me and screamed, “Don’t you *touch* me!” It probably didn’t help that she was black and I am white. And she was correct. I had no right to breach that boundary.

I should have known better. As a pastoral counselor, I have had extensive training in the dynamics of touching. I know its power from both the side of healing and the side of intrusion. It is true with people and it is true with animals as well. My cats are constantly seeking to be stroked and cuddled. An unoccupied lap is an open invitation. But my mother-in-law’s little dog who was likely abused will let no one else touch her. She recoils if you try to pet her.

And it is very unfortunate that the number of unwanted sexual advances by powerful men—whether they be members of the clergy, politicians, bosses, teachers or television personalities—go on unabated in spite of the media coverage and subsequent lawsuits. Beyond the damage it does to the women (and sometimes men) involved—and it can be life changing—there is also damage done to society. For speaking as a male, I am sometimes so fearful that a touch would be misinterpreted that I avoid it at all costs. And this is too bad because it can actually throw up barriers to expressing compassion or just being warm and non-sexually affectionate.

This is an enormously important subject and like anything that occupies a position of centrality in simply being human, it automatically acquires spiritual significance. While we can all agree that at times it is unwelcome and simply too risky in a variety of circumstances (I have discussed misogyny in numerous sermons), I am more interested today in exploring the positives of touching and its potential for healing. And what I hope to do is raise our consciousness for how we can use it in appropriate ways to bring us closer to one another.

I find our scripture this morning to be one of the more touching accounts in the New Testament. And it contains all of the elements we are talking about. A leper approaches Jesus and humbly says, "I know you can heal me. Would you consider doing so?" Permission to touch is not only granted, but requested. And Jesus simply replies, "I choose." Such tenderness! And then he touches him, cleansing him of his leprosy.

Later, when Jesus is visiting Peter's mother-in-law's house and she is in bed with a virus, he voluntarily touches her hand, instantly curing her. Note the difference in this situation. No permission to touch her was necessary because they already had a relationship and trust had previously been established. It is an entirely different context than the first where the leper was a stranger. He knew of Jesus already and trusted him by reputation. But Jesus still waited for the invitation. Can you heal without touch?

There are numerous accounts in the Gospels where touching is critical to the ministry being conducted. There is the washing of the feet; there is the application of the costly nard; there are people reaching out to simply touch Jesus' garments. Touching is critical to making connection to people. Why do we shake hands in greeting? How much is being communicated?

Can you minister without touching? Those of you with whom I have visited in the hospital know that I am going to pray with you and that I will hold your hand or your foot if your hand isn't available or touch your shoulder during our supplications. There is an intimacy involved that cannot be achieved without physical contact. It is both powerful and necessary in the healing process. But I will not impose myself. If I sense you may be uncomfortable with that, I will ask.

I have mentioned my friend, Tony, on a prior occasion. He is a very spry 81-year-old British ex-pat, highly intelligent, owning two degrees in engineering, plays a nice game of golf and shares with me a strong interest in religion, though not from a faith perspective. He is thoroughly agnostic and pertinent to the story you are about to hear, is married to a Jew. He

was diagnosed several years ago with a rare form of leukemia which affects his white platelets, probably acquired 20 some years ago when he was on the clean-up team for Three Mile Island. He receives five days of chemo treatments every four weeks. They spend the winter months in Naples, an exclusive enclave of very rich Jews largely from the northeast. In early March, I received the following e-mail from him:

I have a story which may interest you: We invited a group for dinner at the country club on Sunday night. It was the usual ethnic mix—9 Jews and me. Nine Jews at any function are vociferous with loud discussions on health, investments and money and, above all, politics. My pending chemo and progress was a source of discussion and the fact that the results were not in any way bad but the improvements had stopped and were quite a way down from my great results of last summer.

Towards the end of the evening, a woman from the next table approached us. She said she had overheard our conversation and said she would like to approach the one with cancer. She was attractive, about 40, and elegantly dressed in a black evening gown—this is a very formal club as regards the dining room.

She had a remarkable presence. She rendered the table absolutely silent—no mean feat with nine Jews. All the adjacent tables became silent and the waiters stopped serving. She laid her hands on my head and neck and then shoulders. The episode lasted for about four minutes and no one spoke and she left without speaking. This has never happened to me before and it was an experience that I am unable to describe. The meal ended soon after with everyone somewhat subdued.

Next day was the first day of chemo and this is the time when all the tests are run. At least 21 blood tests are performed which take about 20 minutes to process. A nurse eventually approached me with the summary sheet. She just handed it to me with the statement—“what a remarkable improvement.”

I have no explanation. (Tony's numbers have remained stable for the last two months.)

When we engage in touching, whether we are giving or receiving matters not, lives are changed. We know the downside, but the upside is the creation of a sense of community. It opens us to a deeper connection. I recently had one of those very brief moments that really got to me. Because I frequently exit 75 at Paddock Rd, at the light I more often than not encounter a homeless person with a sign. I keep a stash of singles in my car and hand them out. It is mostly the same individuals who stand there—some of them live under the bridge. And if I am waiting at the light, I will make eye contact and speak with them. There is one fellow—who knows how old he is—but he told me a couple of years ago that he needed eye surgery and could not afford the \$5000 it would cost. In April he was limping real bad and I asked how he had hurt himself and he said he was jumping a fence and fell on a stone retaining wall. And it is now clear that he is going blind. He doesn't see you until you are several feet from him and his eyes have become almost opaque. But he recognizes me up close and when I handed him a couple of bucks it was very discernible as he took the money and asked God to bless me that he intentionally touched my fingers in a way that almost moved me to tears. I wish I could do more, but later I realized that there may have been more good in that brief touch than any amount of money I could give him. It was a human moment.

When we come to church, when we pass the peace during worship, we are in a safe environment and the opportunity to express our care for each other by touching hands or even giving a warm embrace is waiting for us. I believe it is actually a part of our ministry to each other. That is one of the wonderful things about Trinity. I have been in churches that are so formal that any sort of touching beyond a stiff handshake would be unseemly. But not here. We do care. It is part of who we are. How Touching!

Reverend Thomas Dunlap June 18, 2017