

REACH OUT AND TOUCH

Mark 10:13-16

June 27, 2010

Those of you who are parents may have had a moment like this in the early days of your child-rearing. It's the middle of the night and you hear a small voice come from the room down the hall. "Daddy, I'm scared!"

Out of your groggy, fuzzy state, you respond, "Honey, don't be afraid. Daddy's right down the hall." After a very brief pause, the little voice is heard again, "Daddy, I'm still scared."

Always quick with an insight you respond, "You don't need to be afraid. God is with you. God loves you."

This time the pause is a little longer. Then the little voice says, "But Daddy, I want someone with skin on." (Hewett, James L. Illustrations Unlimited. 1988. pg. 301)

Of course, we all want someone with skin on. And more than just *wanting* someone with skin—we *need* someone with skin to touch and be touched. God created us with skin on for a purpose.

Most of us remember from our basic biology class that the skin is the largest organ in the body. Its purpose is to protect the more vulnerable organs inside—to hold us together structurally. But even more, our skin is one of our most important sense organs—it communicates vital information to the rest of our body. Through the sensation of touch, we learn about hot and cold, danger and safety, pain and love in ways deeper than just hearing the words.

We've all heard about the studies done with infants deprived of touch. A few years ago a study was done in a South American orphanage by Rene Spitz, who observed and recorded what happened to 97 children who were deprived of emotional and physical contact with others.

Because of a lack of funds, there was not enough staff to adequately care for these children, ages 3 months to 3 years old. Nurses changed diapers and fed and bathed the children. But there was little time to hold, cuddle, and talk to

them as a mother would. After three months many of them showed signs of abnormality. Besides a loss of appetite and being unable to sleep well, many of the children lay with a vacant expression in their eyes. After five months, serious deterioration set in. They lay whimpering, with troubled and twisted faces. Often, when a doctor or nurse would pick up an infant, it would scream in terror. Twenty-seven, almost one third, of the children died the first year, but not from lack of food or health care. They died of a lack of touch and emotional nurture. Because of this, seven more died the second year. Only twenty one of the 97 survived, most suffering serious psychological damage. (Charles Sell, Unfinished Business, Multnomah, 1989, p. 39.)

Another study was done with babies who were breast-fed by their mothers, held skin to skin from the very first. The results of the study showed that the babies were happier, their temperature and their heart and breathing rates were more stable, and their blood sugar more elevated. Not only that, skin to skin contact immediately after birth allowed the baby to be colonized by the same bacteria as the mother, thus assisting in the prevention of allergic diseases.

Touch is crucial for human survival.

And it's not only children that need that touch. Dr. Virginia Satir, the grandmother of family systems therapy, once said at an orthopsychiatric convention that one way to alleviate depression in individuals is through loving touch. She said, "Our pores are places for messages of love and physical contact...." Then she prescribed: "Four hugs a day are necessary for survival, eight for maintenance, and twelve for growth." (Hewett., op cit., pg. 321).

This need for touch is how God created us. In my opinion, of the five Love Languages we have studied in this sermon series, the language of physical touch is the most profoundly connected with the nature of God and God's relationship with humankind.

Just listen to the words of the songwriter who proclaims God's embrace in the 91st psalm:

"You who sit down in the High God's presence,

spend the night in Shaddai's shadow,
Say this: "GOD, you're my refuge.
I trust in you and I'm safe!"
That's right—he rescues you from hidden traps,
shields you from deadly hazards.
His huge outstretched arms protect you—
under them you're perfectly safe;
his arms fend off all harm....
¹⁴⁻¹⁶ "If you'll hold on to me for dear life," says GOD,
"I'll get you out of any trouble.
I'll give you the best of care
if you'll only get to know and trust me.
Call me and I'll answer, be at your side in bad times,
I will rescue you...." (The Message)

The prophet Daniel, in one of his visions written in the first testament book attributed to his name, sees God coming in human form to earth. In Daniel 10:18-19, he writes that God touched him, then said, "You who are greatly beloved, fear not; peace be with you. Be strong and of good courage." Through both word and touch, Daniel is given peace and strength to do the work God called him to do.

As Christians, we believe that God so loved us, and understood how we were made to touch and be touched, that our beloved Creator sent Jesus to us. The term "incarnation" means to come in flesh, to come with skin on so that God might touch and be touched.

Think about all those lucky people who felt the touch of God through Christ! Those many people who came to him with infirmities who were made whole when Christ's hand touched their flesh. If you have your Bibles with you, let's read of one such time from Mark 8:22-26. Starting in verse 23 we hear, "And he took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the village; and when he had spit on his eyes and laid his hands upon him, he asked him, "Do you see anything?" And he looked up and said, "I see men; but they look like trees walking." Then again he laid his hands upon his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and saw everything clearly."

The man was made whole through Jesus' touch. But healing didn't come solely by Jesus' initiating the touch; it also came when people reached out and touched Jesus, as we hear in the scripture from Mark 5:25-34 when the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years reached out and touched Jesus garment, and, as the scripture said, "she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease."

Finally, it's not only the physical body that's made well through physical touch. The health of our communities and institutions are made stronger because of the way we touch one another.

In our scripture this morning we heard _____ read about Jesus and the children. When he saw the disciples separating them from the rest of the community who came to hear Jesus, when he heard his disciples shaming them with their words, he stopped them, and had the children come to him, and taking them in his arms, he blessed them, laying his hands upon them.

Of all the symbols in our sanctuary that reveal God's purpose for our world—our stained-glass window of Jesus welcoming, loving, blessing, touching the children is a vision of how he wants us to welcome, love, bless and touch all of God's children. When we touch one another with loving care, our community is made whole. And, if we are to believe the studies of Dr. Virginia Satir, the more we touch one another with loving embrace, the more even communities and institutions can grow in strength and in health.

That's why it grieves all of us that in the brokenness of our world, the abuses of this God-given, divinely created sensory gift have left us starved for affectionate touch. There may be some here today who are victims of violent touch—whose spirits as well as bodies were raped of the joy that touch can bring. When someone has been hurt by the touch of another, it may be hard to trust any form of embrace.

I personally grieve the necessity of the rules and regulations that exist in our current cultural climate that constrain teachers and preachers from sharing comfort and support with hugs because others have inappropriately sexualized

their touch. Most of you know I'm a hugger, but I also am aware most pastors today are taught in seminary NOT to hug their parishioners because of the susceptibility for such touch to step over the line in the abuse of boundaries.

And I grieve the dissolution of relationships when the intimate touch of spouses, life companions, is withdrawn—and then shared with another. Dr. Gary Chapman, author of the book from which this study comes, says this about our times:

“This age is characterized as the age of sexual openness and freedom. With that freedom we have demonstrated that the open marriage where both spouses are free to have sexual intimacies with other individuals is fanciful. Those who not object on moral grounds eventually object on emotional grounds. Something about our need for intimacy and love does not allow us to give our life-partners such freedom. The emotional pain is deep, and intimacy evaporates when we are aware that the one with whom we have a commitment/covenant is involved with someone else sexually. Counselors' files are filled with records of men and women who are trying to grapple with the emotional trauma of infidelity. That trauma, however, is compounded for the individual whose primary love language is physical touch. That for which he longs so deeply—love expressed by physical touch—is now being given to another. Her emotional love tank is not only empty; it has been riddled by an explosion. It will take massive repairs for those emotional needs to be met.” (pg. 113)

And then he concludes—“Clearly, our bodies are for touching, but not for abuse—and infidelity is one form of abuse.”

With all this need for cautionary touch, with all the abuses that go on within intimate family relationships, and as a part of the brokenness of community through powerlessness and war, poverty and sexism, what in the world can the church do?

First and foremost, as Christians, we must be honest with ourselves and do a check in with our own actions. We must ask ourselves, “Where have I hurt someone with an act of violent touch—like a slap or a shove--instead of patient

listening? Or, on the other hand, where have I withdrawn my healthy, loving touch simply to punish a loved one?" Healing begins with our own awareness and conversion to Christ's loving touch in the world.

Second, we must be advocates for those who are most vulnerable to violent touch. We must report child abuse, no matter if the perpetrator is a best friend, pastor of a church, or respected government official. We have to be the protective societal skin for those children who cannot protect themselves.

Third, we can support shelters which become safe havens for those who are escaping from abusive situations. In fact, we can stake a claim that this church property is more than just a sanctuary for worship—it is a sanctuary for those who are seeking protection from violent relationships, where they can be safe from abusive touch by others. Already the adults who work with our children willingly allow background checks to be done.

And finally, we can begin to embrace the world in healthy, holy ways, following our Christ's example.

In one of my former congregations, there was a family who felt called to care for children who had been taken out of abusive home situations and placed in foster care. In addition to three grown biological children, the family adopted 6 kids, all of them with case files that were so horrendous that most people couldn't finish reading them, and everyone who read them couldn't keep the tears from streaming.

The year I directed JYF camp, Jeff was one of my campers. He was 10 years old—in fifth grade, and a typical rambunctious boy. One afternoon, Jeff decided he would try to pull a newly planted sapling tree out of the ground. It was hot and I was operating on not much sleep, and I went into Ms. Morgan mode—my teacher voice from my former profession coming out sharp and fast.

As I fussed at Jeff for his misbehavior, he slumped to the ground and curled up in a tight ball in fetal position. Immediately, I realized he thought I was going to hit him—as probably had happened to him sometime in his past when someone fussed at him like I was doing.

I tried to talk to him, to get him to loosen his grip around himself, but he held fast, his face hidden from me as he cried and cried.

Nothing I *said* helped. So instead, I sat down beside him, and not saying a word, I just rubbed his back. And as I rubbed his back, I hummed camp songs that he knew, songs with words that we had sung as a community about Jesus' love.

As I rubbed his back and hummed, I prayed for God to hold him close, so that he could feel God's presence. I prayed that as my hands touched him, that they would communicate God's care and comfort to him.

Finally, he unfolded his body, and without a word, we both got up and went on to the next camp activity, and at the end of the week, we went home.

Over the years, I saw how, bit by bit, the love and attention that he got from his church family slowly soothed his spirit. Whenever he came to church, he was gently slapped on the back by his elders, hugged by adopted grannies, and had his hand shaken with respect by the other leaders of the congregation. I never again saw him curl in a fetal position.

Jeff grew up and became a policeman dedicated to protecting other children from violence—and is still active in the church, and I saw in the church paper that he helped out with VBS just last week.

Brothers and Sisters, we have the power—together—to help heal the world with just a touch. It begins at home and how we treat ourselves and others. But it can't stop there—we must, for the wholeness of the world—reach out and touch somebody with the hand of Jesus.

Amen