

The Power of Touch

Mark 10:13-16

One day some parents brought their children to Jesus so he could touch them and bless them, but the disciples told them not to bother him. But when Jesus saw what was happening, he was very displeased with his disciples. He said to them, "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you, anyone who doesn't have their kind of faith will never get into the Kingdom of God." Then he took the children into his arms and placed his hands on their heads and blessed them.

I like to give blood. Unfortunately, anemia keeps me from doing it very often. But when I was younger, I gave whenever I could. I first donated blood at a high school drive, and I continued doing it in college. Giving blood was not a new experience. So one afternoon, after I had finished my classes, instead of walking home I headed over to the student union. I walked up the stairs into the old ballroom and signed in. I hope that many of you have also donated blood and know this process.

When you give blood, here's a hint. Wear short sleeves. Oh sure, you can wear long sleeves, but then you have to roll or scrunch them up, and it's very difficult to get your sleeve up high enough for a blood pressure cuff. So I wear short sleeves to give blood, but here's the thing. I'm almost always cold. So I had a sweatshirt over my t-shirt. When my name was called, I walked over to the chair and I took off my sweatshirt.

Now when you're cold, it's harder to find a vein. The nurse who was working with me was having a little trouble, so she rubbed her hand on my arm. As soon as her hand touched my arm, I had an epiphany. Other than the occasional handshake or accidental bump, I couldn't remember the last time someone had touched me. There was nothing inappropriate about what the nurse was doing or how she was touching my arm; in fact, it was very reassuring to feel that connection between two people. And it made me realize how very rarely anyone touched me. I was astonished. I had been living in community, but without any kind of physical contact, in a very real way I still felt alone.

Touch is a powerful sense. Touch has a way of making things real to us. I can see, hear, and smell things from a distance. But in order to touch, I have to be closer. Touch removes any doubt that something is an illusion. You can't pretend that touch isn't real. All of our senses connect us to the world in one way or another, but touch does it in the most basic, literal way. Physical contact is extremely powerful, especially when it is the contact between people.

Unfortunately, our culture is hyper-aware of the devastating effects when the power of touch is misused. In fact, some of you might even squirm in your seats a little bit every time I say the word 'touch.' Because more often than not, when we hear about one person touching another, it's in the context of scandal, violence, and abuse. It's staggering to think about how many people misuse touch, and the diverse ways in which they do it. Domestic abuse. Street fights. Bullying. Child abuse. Sexual harassment. Hate crimes. And not every misuse of touch is a crime. We've all seen footage of a great After Thanksgiving Sale where throngs of people shoved and pushed others out of their way in order to save a few dollars on a Christmas present that will be forgotten by next year. It *should* be a crime to treat people that way.

So we desperately seek ways to reduce and prevent violence. As a culture, we often do this by reaching out to our next generation, hoping they won't make the same mistakes we have. Schools offer gang-resistance education. Organizations are reaching out to curb bullying before it escalates into anything worse. Health classes include curriculum about child abuse and domestic violence.

One way we've tried to protect ourselves is to teach our children about 'good touches' and 'bad touches.' Most of us have been part of that conversation more than once, often in different capacities each time. I can still remember one day in either first or third grade when the local police department came to talk to us about 'bad touches.' They taught us how to recognize

‘bad touches’ and where we could go for help. By college I was on the other side of the conversation. I spent a summer working at Camp Lucerne, and all of us had to go through training. As an adult, the training had two aspects. The first was to remind us what kind of behavior is inappropriate. But the majority of the training was about how to protect ourselves from being *accused* of inappropriate behavior. In our society, even if you’ve done nothing wrong, an accusation is all it takes to drastically change your life. And throughout the summer, I was responsible for helping to give that same training to many of the camp leaders and counselors who came through.

A few years later it was an all-day training seminar in Colorado before I could work as a youth leader. And that same conversation popped up again when I attended the New Clergy Orientation here in Wisconsin. So I guess what I’m trying to tell you is that I can’t even begin to count how many times I’ve been part of a ‘good touches/bad touches’ discussion – either as child, youth, or adult. I think that’s a good thing. I think that helps to protect our children and young people from abuse. I think it helps save good adults from false allegations. But I also can’t think of a single occasion when one of those discussions actually talked about ‘good touches.’

For example, at camp. Part of our standard lecture was to tell people that they should avoid straight-on hugs. If you wanted to hug a camper, it had to be a side-hug only. But no one ever mentioned how important those side-hugs are to developing self-esteem. We told counselors that if they wanted one-on-one time with a camper, they had to be within sight of another adult, and they had to inform the other adult that they would be having one-on-one time. But no one ever mentioned what a big difference one-on-one conversations can make. Our culture is so afraid that any touching might be construed as a ‘bad touch,’ we’ve stopped touching each other altogether. Somewhere along the way, we have lost the incredible power of ‘good touches.’

But Jesus knew the incredible ways touch could improve our lives. Jesus touched hundreds of people – not in any abusive or inappropriate way – but in order to heal, to comfort, and to bless. There are, of course, countless examples of Jesus healing in the Scriptures. Jesus had the disciples go ahead of him to prepare a boat, because he knew he was going to be so surrounded by people seeking his healing touch that he was going to need an escape route. There are multiple stories of people who reached out to touch even the hem of Jesus' cloak. Jesus helps the blind to see, the lame to walk, the lepers to be clean. Luke 4:40 sums it all up quite nicely: *As the sun went down that evening, people throughout the village brought sick family members to Jesus. No matter what their diseases were, the touch of his hand healed every one.*

A bit later in Luke, we read a story of how Jesus' touch brings compassion and comfort. Do you remember this story? Jesus is eating dinner with Simon – not the disciple but a powerful man. Then a woman, a sinner (a prostitute) washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. Simon is upset that Jesus would let her touch him. Jesus responds by telling the man a parable about forgiveness. Now the woman was not forgiven *because* she touched Jesus; Jesus used that touch as an outward and visible sign of the inward forgiveness and grace he had already given to her. But through the power of touch, he was able to show Simon what he was doing in her heart.

In our Scripture reading this morning, we find Jesus using the power of touch to bless the children. He welcomes them into his arms. He places his hands on their heads. Now, let me remind you that we're talking here about Jesus, The Messiah, The Christ; if he wanted to, he could have blessed these children when they were miles away. He didn't have to touch them. But somehow, that touch helps us to visualize the blessing.

Of course, Jesus didn't have to touch people in order to heal them either. In fact, in some healing stories Jesus doesn't actually touch anyone. But Jesus knew how powerful touch could be. It was Jesus' divine power that blessed and healed his followers. But the power of touch helped to heal their hearts. It helped to calm their souls. It helped them feel connected with the one who was doing the healing.

Today, when we baptize people into the church, we don't send them off to run through a sprinkler or jump in a river. We hold infants in our arms. We stand next to adults, and when we take water from the baptismal font, we touch their heads. At Confirmation, the students come forward and we lay our hands on their heads and shoulders. Touch is a powerful sense.

Touch has the power to help us feel connected. When we *abuse* the power of touch, it becomes violent. It breaks relationships and drives people apart. But when we *avoid* the power of touch, we keep ourselves separated from one another. We must learn to harness the power of touch in all its beneficial forms: condolence, compassion, encouragement, healing, blessing, togetherness... Through the incredible power of touch, we can transform lives in positive ways. We can help people literally feel God's presence. Amen and amen.