

Mark 5:21-43

Touch is a wonderful and intimate thing.

Our sense of touch, or somatoreception if you want to get fancy, can give us so much information. Touch can, in some small way, replace vision. We can tell the shape of something by feel. Those who have learned to do so can read by touch and navigate the world by touch with a white cane. Even those of us with no training can usually find our ways through our homes at night by touch.

Touch gives us information about the consistency of something. Was Jesus' cloak rough or smooth? Was it silky soft, or was it crusty with road dirt? Touch tells us if something is wet or dry, sticky or slippery. How hot might it have been that day? How many days might Jesus have been wearing his cloak? Or did he get out a new one? He was on his way to see the leader of the synagogue after all.

Our sense of touch tells us if something is hot or cold. When power went out of Jesus and healed the woman with a hemorrhage, what did that feel like? Was it hot? When she felt within her body that she was healed did it feel like electricity or cool flowing water?

Touch, contact, is how we accomplish things. Without a sense of touch we could not write, or chop onions, or create art.

Our sense of touch includes pain and itch receptors. It protects us from the dangerous things in this world, from biting mosquitos to burning flames.

It's wonderful that while it protects us, touch also brings us closer. Touch is also very intimate. Even before the pandemic, when was the last time you touched the clothing of someone who does not share your house? Touch is how we get attention, express affection, release passion. A new baby nestles skin-to-skin with her mother, and the touch gives her comfort and love, helps her to feel safe, warm, cherished, and treasured. We need that touch, we are not human without it. Babies and children from over-crowded orphanages in the former Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, touched very rarely and never affectionately, are profoundly psychologically damaged.

Metaphorically, touch can even enter our hearts, and when we see that baby snuggled close, we say, "it's touching."

Touch has real power. And that makes touch dangerous. Used rightly it expresses love, but too often touch is used in unwelcome ways to cause violation or pain, leaving physical or emotional scars that never heal. To use something given to us for the expression of love to instead degrade, manipulate, or assert dominance is blasphemy against the Spirit of Love.

Touch conveys uncleanness. How many times a day do you wash your hands or use sanitizer? But it passes on uncleanness in the ritual sense too. Touching a corpse means an observant Jew is considered unclean. A discharge like the woman's bleeding means a person is considered unclean, and those who touch them or even the chair they sat on become unclean as well, unable to fully interact with others or the Lord until they had purified themselves.

The woman with a hemorrhage had likely not touched or been touched for a very long time. Jesus might have been the first person she touched for twelve years. We are just now starting to touch one another after an awful year and a half. What would that be like, to go without the touch of another person for twelve years? The poor woman could not hold her husband's hand or hug her children, or embrace her friends.

But when she touched Jesus' clothes, instead of her uncleanness being transferred to Jesus, his purity was transferred to her. And she was given not only healing, but the power to touch and be touched. And that is power indeed.

When Jesus healed the man born blind, he made mud and put it on his eyes. When he healed the deaf man, he put his fingers in his ears and touched his tongue. When the leper came, asking to be made clean, Jesus touched him and healed him. The people who brought children to Jesus didn't bring them so that they could see him from a distance, but so the he might touch them. After the transfiguration, when his disciples were confused and frightened, Jesus touched them. When Peter cut off the slave's ear, Jesus touched it and healed it. When Jesus finally got to Jairus' house, he took his dead daughter's corpse by the hand and raised her up. When Jesus himself had been raised, he showed his friends his hands and his side and invited them to touch him.

Over and over in scripture we hear about how the prophets and apostles laid hands on people, to set the aside for particular callings, to give them the gift of the Holy Spirit, or to heal them in body mind or soul. Still today I anoint the forehead of the baptized, the Bishop lays hands on those being confirmed or ordained, a healing service includes laying on of hands and anointing, and, by intention at least, in a few minutes we would usually exchange hugs and handshakes as we share the power of God's peace.

Our touch of faith is powerful, and wondrous, because in the meal we share we reach out our hands and touch Jesus. We hold him in our hands, we kiss him with our lips, we take him into our very bodies. His purity cleanses us, power goes out from him and heals us, his love touches our hearts. And sends us out to his beloved world, that has been bleeding and untouched for so very long.

Come close to the world and to each image of God you find there. Touch it, caress it, lay your hands on it, let power go out from you, take its cold hand and raise it up, give it something to eat.