

Touching the Untouchable

I recently read an article that made the claim  
The more NBA players touch one another  
I know it sounds corny but here it is

The more they do their high fives  
Chest bumps  
And hugs  
The better the team performs.

Studies recognize the importance of nonsexual  
touch.

From the cradle to the nursing home  
Deep down within us all  
There is a critical need to be touched.

We know premature babies need it.

That without someone holding them  
They lose their urge to live  
Drifting into apathy and eventual death.

We also know the elderly in nursing homes crave it.

Studies have shown that residents in nursing homes  
Who are touched have a more positive attitude.

Another study found that waiters/waitresses  
Who touch their customers receive a better tip.  
From birth to death people need human touch.

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The problem is . . .

From an article in *Christianity Today* titled  
*The Spiritual Power of Physical Touch*

*In a society where touch is primarily associated with sexual desire, hug a new friend and you might be perceived as coming on too strong. Kiss a work associate? Grounds for a harassment lawsuit. When you do touch, it is often marked by awkwardness.*

*The “British Medical Journal” published an article titled “The No Touching Epidemic—an English Disease,” in which symptoms of this illness included a sense of isolation and loneliness, insecurity, emotional inhibition, and inability to communicate with neighbors.*

We’re also moving toward a touchless society  
Viewing touch in suspicious ways.

It’s understandable . . .

What with the abuse of touch  
By men (and women I might add)  
In positions of power.

I understand why those who were abused  
Recoil from a person’s touch.

So let me say when I speak of touch today

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I speak of touch in a safe, trusting, and nonsexual way.

From the Huffington Post:

*“If you don’t get touch right after you’re born, all kinds of terrible things happen, and not just cognitive and emotional,” said Linden. “Your immune system doesn’t develop properly, your digestive system tends to have problems — there’s a whole rack of health problems that can develop if you don’t receive touch in early life.”*

*In the 1950s, parenting manuals advised parents not to touch their children too much — recommending, instead of hugs and kisses, giving kids a “pat on the head.” But Linden warns that touch deprivation denies children a chance to become socially integrated with the people around them.*

*“A parent’s touch is very crucial for a child’s development,” said Linden. “It’s not optional.”*

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We are becoming a society of untouchables.

Not so in other cultures.

One of the more difficult cultural adjustments in Nigeria

Was to allow my male friends to hold my hand.

In fact, one image remains etched in my mind.

Touching the Untouchable  
Three police officers walking along the road  
Holding one another's hands.

There is a spiritual element to touch.

In other words, there is something of God in touch.  
Jesus knows this.

Page through the gospels  
You'll find Jesus healing  
Casting out demons  
And blessing through touch.

Not only . . .

There was the woman convinced  
That if she could just touch  
The hem of his robe she might be healed.

Such is the importance of touch.

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Today's Mark passage is an example.

It takes us to the early days  
In the ministry of Jesus.

We find Jesus traveling through the region of  
Galilee.

In one village a leper approaches Jesus.

And as the crowds look on in complete horror

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The leper drops down on his knees in front of  
Jesus

*If you are willing, you can make me clean.*

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A few words on leprosy.

Leprosy in the Bible is defined as any infectious skin disease.

It could be leprosy,

It could be tuberculosis

It could be any number of skin disorders.

According to the Levitical Code

A person who has leprosy was an untouchable

An outcast in Jewish society.

Two whole chapters in Leviticus

Devote themselves to laws relating to leprosy.

***Leviticus 13:45-46 (NIV)***

***45 “Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ 46 As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp.***

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Imagine the shame a leper felt

As people cringed and recoiled from him

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Imagine their sense of guilt

For the Jewish understanding

Was that leprosy was punishment for  
sin.

No one could touch them nor could they touch  
anyone.

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And so it happened on that particular day

As the crowds surround Jesus

A leper approaches.

He doesn't yell from a distance, "Unclean."

Fully aware he is breaking Jewish Law

The leper walks through the crowd

Parting it like Moses parting the Red Sea.

And kneeling before Jesus, says

*If you are willing, heal me.*

Jesus filled with compassion

Also breaking Jewish law

And for all to see

Reaches out and touches him.

*I am willing, he said. Be healed!*

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What you have here represents the spiritual plight

Of the human condition.

In our disobedience we are separated from God.

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But God, full of love and compassion  
Reaches out, touches and restores  
Humanity to its original wholeness.

Jesus willingly crosses legal and social restrictions.

Jesus touches the untouchable.

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Because of the horrific atrocities  
That have taken place in the Catholic Church

I sense a continual shift  
Towards an untouchable society.

We need to reclaim touch as an important element  
In the life of the church.

Back to the article in Christianity Today:

*What would a church look like that took such a high view of the body, as designed by God for intimate physical touch?*

*A congregation might link arms after communion—an intimate shared meal—and sing together to express their care and connection to each other.*

*A pastor might offer healing prayer and anointing with oil, warm, physical touch when a person is most vulnerable. A small group might commit to*

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*serving by cuddling infants at the local NICU or offering manicures to the elderly at a local nursing home.*

*A Christian might volunteer to hold the hand of a church member who lies dying. In all of these ways and more, the church can speak against the message of our culture that intimate touch is unnecessary—or limited only to sex. These acts offer what could become essential forms of resistance in a culture of increasing isolation.*

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A good man died this week

And will be buried today . . . Senator John McCain.

Whether you agreed with him politically

You have to admit he was a true patriot

A man of honor and integrity.

I have tried to substantiate the story

I believe came from John McCain's time as a POW.

It was a story during McCain's time in solitary confinement.

For months, McCain saw only the hand of his captor

As he pushed his meager meal into his cage

One day, the prison guard placed the meal down

And allowed his hand to linger

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In the small opening in the door.

McCain, having not seen another human for months  
Starved for human touch  
Grabbed his captor's hand and held on to it.

For a pregnant moment  
The guard allowed McCain to hold his hand.

Even the hand of his enemy  
Satisfied McCain's need for human touch.

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As I said there is a spiritual element to touch.

There is something of God in it.

And so when we touch or when we are touched  
In good, healthy ways, God is there.  
As Rob Moll, the author of the article writes:

*Each time we reach out and touch someone, we communicate the tangible truth of the gospel—that God in Christ reaches out to each of us, drawing us into intimate relationship with Him and those around us.*

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Because Jesus healed others through touch . . .

Because we know the healing properties of touch . . .

Because

When two or three are gathered in Jesus' name

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Jesus is present

Because the church continues the ministry of Jesus

Because through touch

We are blessed, strengthen, and healed

I invite you to consider the anointing  
service.

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We turn to the Book of James for instruction.

***James 5:13-15 (NIV)***

***<sup>13</sup> Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. <sup>14</sup> Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup> And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.***

Many believe the anointing service

Should be reserved for those

Facing death or serious illness.

I think we misinterpret the passage.

From the Brethren website:

*We anoint one another by gathering with people who are ill, hurting, struggling with decisions or*

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*beginning a new phase of life. Our presence, together with the oil and prayers, represents the healing and comfort of Jesus. By anointing one another we trust that God hears our prayers and works for the good of the one we lift in prayer.*

And why do we use oil?

*Oil has many uses and meanings. It is an ointment for healing our skin. It has been used to consecrate kings, leaders and even new followers of Jesus. Putting a touch of oil on someone's head prayerfully assures us of God's healing, constant presence with us as followers of Jesus.*

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The Brethren traditionally anoint for 3 things  
Each of which we can all identify:

We anoint for the forgiveness of sin  
We anoint for the strengthening of faith  
We anoint for healing and wholeness.

During the singing of our last hymn  
If the Spirit leads you

Come forward and let me anoint you  
In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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***Is there no balm in Gilead?  
Is there no physician there?***

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***Is there no healing for the wound of my people?***

***(Jeremiah 8:22)***

*There is a balm in Gilead*

His name is Jesus!