

Mark 1:40-42
Touching the Untouchable
WRCoB 9.3.23

Let me start by quoting from an article in *Christianity Today*

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.

Get this, the article was written in 2019

Before the pandemic and its isolating experiences.

The pandemic has definitely compounded the problem.

It's difficult to know if to hug, who to hug, and when to hug

And now, with Covid potentially on the rise

Will physical touch be another innocent victim?

But really, even before the pandemic

We were moving towards a touchless society

It's understandable.

What with the abuse of touch
By mostly men in powerful positions.

Our society has become suspicious
Of anyone who wants to touch.

This is not the case in many other cultures
Where it is quite normal to hold hands with the same sex

I think Christians need to buck the trend
Towards a touchless society.

That in a safe and trusting environment
Physical touch is vital for our bodies and spirit.

Studies has shown that if you aren't touched soon after birth
All kinds of negative things happen.

"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" (Huffington Post)

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From the cradle to the nursing home
Deep within us is a longing to be touched.

Premature babies need to be touched.

Without touch they lose their urge to live
Drifting into apathy and eventual death.

It is also true the elderly in nursing homes
Crave physical touch.

Residents in nursing homes who are touched
Have a much more positive attitude.

When a waiter/waitress lightly touch a customer
Studies have shown they receive a higher tip.

The need for touch is also apparent in sports
With all the high-fives, fist and chest bumps.

Our bodies need to touch and be touched.

Again, from CT:

A fully Christian understanding of the body recognizes that we are not merely creatures of belief, formed by study and sermons. We are beings of longings, desires, and passions that are shaped by our bodies, made in the image of God. Our bodies are created to be linked together in committed intimacy with others.

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Jesus touched people.

He touched people to affirm their value
To forgive them
To heal them.

There are more than 20 accounts in the New Testament
Where Jesus touched or was touched by people.

Even going so far as touching his garment.

In touch, there is something of the power of God.

Mind you, touch can be abused
We all know that.

But touch if done in a sincere and caring way
Is so vital for health and wholeness.

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Our lesson today is a small passage.

Two simple verses.

But it contains a huge message on the need
For God's healing and wholeness
And the importance of touch.

We are in the early days in the ministry of Jesus.

The verses before today's lesson
Has Jesus getting up early before daylight to pray.

The disciples search for him and find him
Telling Jesus people had gathered to see him

Mark 1:38 NLT But Jesus replied, "We must go on to other towns as well, and I will preach to them, too. That is why I came." ³⁹ So he traveled throughout the region of Galilee, preaching in the synagogues and casting out demons.

In one of the villages a leper approaches Jesus.

As the crowds looked on in absolute horror
The leper kneels down in front of Jesus

If you choose, you can make me clean.

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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.

It was all lumped together and called leprosy.

According to the Levitical Code
A person with leprosy was untouchable
For somewhat justifiable reasons.

Because some of these infectious skin diseases
Were also contagious.

Better isolate, like we did in our recent pandemic
Than risk becoming infected.

And rather than caring for these people
In as loving way as possible
They were cast out of Jewish society.

Two whole chapters in Leviticus
Are devoted to laws relating to leprosy.

Here are two verses.

Leviticus 13:45-46 CEB

⁴⁵ Anyone with an infection of skin disease must wear torn clothes, dishevel their hair, cover their upper lip, and shout out, “Unclean! Unclean!” ⁴⁶ They will be unclean as long as they are infected. They are unclean. They must live alone outside the camp.

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Can you imagine the shame he felt
As people cringed and recoiled from him?

It wasn't just because of the skin disease.

Jewish teachings taught that leprosy was a result of sin
Doubling their feelings of disgrace.

No one was allowed to touch them
Nor were they allowed to touch anyone else.

You have to understand the tremendous loneliness
As lepers lived separated from their loved ones.

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And so, it happened on that particular day

As the crowds surrounded him
This poor, lonely, desperate leper came to Jesus

He didn't yell from a distance, “unclean”
Like he was supposed to.

Fully aware he was breaking Jewish Law
He walked through the crowd
Parting it like Moses parting the Red Sea.

And he came to Jesus and he knelt before him.

If you choose . . .

And fully aware that he himself was breaking the law
And with the whole community watching every move

Jesus, moved with compassion
Reached out and touched him.

"I choose," he said. "Be healed!"

Jesus chooses to touch the untouchable.

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What you have here
Is the plight of the human condition.

We are the untouchables

We are the ones caught up in the bondage of sin

We are the ones dealing with physical and mental illnesses

We try and fight our weaknesses, addictions, and anxieties.

Like the leper, we isolate from loved ones
Due to the net the world has encircled us with.

And Jesus comes to our village.

And like the leper, we see our chance
We kneel before Jesus asking for healing.

Why? Because, here is a God full of love and compassion

Willing to cross legal and social boundaries
To touch and to restore humanity
To its original wholeness.

Jesus touches the untouchable, the leper and me!

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In the lesson, Jesus teaches us that touch is of God.

That the touch of Jesus can heal and make whole.

But that touch itself, if used in the right way
In the name of Jesus
Has healing properties.

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And so, let us, even in the midst of a possible resurgence
With masks if need be
Touch one another
Through a hug, handshake, or fist bump

Make touch a part of who you are.

Make it a point to reach out and hug someone.

Particularly someone you know who is struggling.

Be a volunteer to cuddle preemies at a local NICU.

Do a manicure or pedicure for someone at a nursing home.

Sit with someone who is dying and hold their hand.

As Christians, let us buck the trend
Towards a touchless society.

Because we are the hands and feet of Jesus
Here in this world.

We are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

We are called to make known the tenderness of God
Through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

As Rob Moll, the author of the CT 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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The Book of James reads

James 5:13-16 NLT

¹³ Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. ¹⁴ Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven.

We use the anointing service
For anyone who is sick or suffering

Anyone struggling with sin
Or experiencing any major life changes

The touch of the hand
Together with the oil and prayers
In the name of Jesus offers healing and comfort.

Because Jesus healed others through touch.

Because we know the healing properties of our own touch.

Because
When two or three are gathered in Jesus' name
Jesus is present

Because through touch
We are blessed, strengthen, and healed.

I invite you forward, following our last hymn
To be anointed

For the forgiveness of sin
For the strengthening of faith
And for healing and wholeness