

Simple Touch July 20, 2008

A pastor friend of mine in Texas, Rudy Rasmus, has written a book entitled *Touch*, and he begins it with the Bible passage that we have for today. It would probably be helpful to have a little context so we could understand what's going on when we read, "Deeply moved, Jesus put out his hand, touched him, and said, 'I want to. Be clean.'"

This is part of one of the many stories that show how Jesus showed his compassion and care for everyone by being willing to reach out and touch...even those others would never dare to touch. In this case, it was one who was afflicted with leprosy—a skin disease that turned those who had it into total outcasts. In fact, at the time that Jesus lived, lepers were banished from the communities in which they had lived, and were made to dress in such a way that they could be easily identified and shunned.

Jesus was preaching and teaching in the area of the leper colony, and a leper defied the law and came to Jesus, seeking to be healed. While most others would have turned away, and never, ever have touched the man, Jesus did just the opposite. We are told that he literally touched the leper, and the power of that touch made him whole.

My friend Rudy shares why that passage and others like it were so meaningful to him as he grew to know Jesus. He writes: "I was fascinated by how he related to men and women—people on the edge—people just like me. He didn't care who people were. He just loved them. And his love wasn't some pious statement uttered from a distance; he touched them! He intentionally reached out and touched poor people, sick people, unclean people, society's outcasts, precocious children, and anybody else who wanted to connect with him." Knowing that Jesus was one who believed and practiced the power of touch was something that shaped and molded Rudy's ministry at St. John's Downtown in Houston, Texas.

Jesus understood just how powerful touching was, and it still is today. The reality is that physical touch is vital for our well-being; it is essential for the growth of the body as well as the mind. In fact, it's been proven that the lack of loving touch with infants results in their growing and developing more slowly. From newborns to senior citizens, research shows that a loving touch has many positive effects: it enhances attentiveness, alleviates symptoms of depression, reduces pain, reduces stress, and improves our immune function. Touching is good for us.

All we have to do is thumb through the Bible, and we'll find story after story of how Jesus touched people, either physically, spiritually or emotionally and helped them find wholeness. He touched the woman with the hemorrhage, and one referred to as the bent-over woman. He touched the soldier's daughter, and

many others, bringing healing and wholeness to their broken and lonely lives.

It seems to me that we could benefit in today's world from reclaiming the power of touch. We've become a little gun-shy, and with good cause. There is such a thing as "bad touch," and we warn our children to run from such a thing. Pastors and teachers are reminded to be careful when it comes to even something as common as hugging, and that word of caution is, unfortunately, warranted in all too many situations.

Furthermore, we're living in a world where human touch is becoming less and less frequent, even a rare experience for us. Dr. Ron Jensen has noted, "Somehow, as we get older and society celebrates more and more the individual rather than the group, and more of us work out of our homes, and our houses don't have porches, and our street don't have sidewalks, and our computers do our communicating, we slowly lose our connectedness." That's the connectedness that comes through human contact, the human factor, human touch.

With all our technology, we can go days, and I suppose even weeks, without face-to-face human contact. Even talking on the phone with a human being, especially in the business world, seems to be a very remote possibility.

Tom Ehrich, in one of his columns that I clipped out, wrote about that very thing. He reported that he had received a notice that his son's college tuition was overdue and the final date for payment was the next day. However, they had no record of having received a notice, so Ehrich tried to call the school. After trying to negotiate a maze of recorded instruction, and waiting on hold for what seemed like forever, he remained frustrated and without good answers to his questions.

I doubt that that kind of experience is a surprise to any of us, because most of us have probably been caught in those kinds of situations. Whether we need to talk to our doctor's office, or our insurance company, or tried to get tech support for a computer problem, we never seem to encounter a real human being! As Ehrich said, most of our systems lack basic human elements like common sense, politeness, flexibility and warmth. They lack the human touch that changes things from impersonal and uncaring to responsive and compassionate.

However, it seems to me that if we can't find it "out there," then you and I need to think about how we create it where we are. We need to think about how Jesus touched lives with a word of encouragement or acceptance, hope and possibility, how he changed the lives of those he encountered—sometimes with a simple touch, sometimes with a word, perhaps with a look. How can we do the same?

When we were talking about this topic at worship team, several team members shared ways in which they had experienced the power of the human touch, or ways in which others had expressed appreciation to them for their ways of touching lives. One person said that his dentist has a good way of putting the usually nervous patient at ease, just by a warm touch on the shoulder before beginning work—just

to show he or she knows there's a real human being in there who is a bit unnerved to be sitting in the dentist chair.

Still another individual shared how someone had expressed the fact that they appreciated the interest and care she had shown them. The person doing the thanking even said that it was clear that someone believed in her, and that made all the difference in the world. She experienced the human touch.

One of the most powerful testimonies I remember hearing was from a dear friend whose wife was killed in an automobile accident many years ago. Still today he tells of the visitor at his wife's calling who made the greatest impact on him. It was someone from his graduate school days—someone who had struggled with grades, someone who was just sort of an plain, ordinary guy, a big guy with, as it turned out, a huge heart.

Upon hearing of his friends tragic circumstances, he packed his wife and kids into his car, and hit the road. He drove 12-13 hours to reach the funeral home at the time of the calling. He walked in, hugged my friend in a long, deep bear-like hug, never saying a word, and walked back to his car, and drove the long trip back home again. Wow! The power of a hug—the power of the human touch!

The power of human touch is needed everywhere we turn. The elderly are so often deprived of a hug or even a hand on the shoulder. Spouses die; children are absent; friends move away, and the hugs that once embraced their lives seem to have silently slipped away, totally unseen, never experienced.

Those who are the outcasts of our day never get to experience the power of the human touch. Oh sure, they get food at the shelters, and maybe a bed for the night, but when does someone shake their hand and say, "Good to see you?" The answer is almost never.

I mentioned my friend Rudy Rasmus at the beginning, and Rudy is one who has taken the example of Jesus and lived it! His church, which had nine remaining members when he and his wife arrived, now boasts a congregation 9000 members, 3000 of whom are or previously were, homeless. He reaches out to the gang members, the prostitutes, the drug addicts. In fact, he puts it like this, "Homeless people and addicts sat in the pews with people of power and prominence. It was thrilling! It looked like the kingdom of God to me."

In some way, the ministry of St. John's Downtown reminds me of a story I read about Mother Theresa, who was walking down the street in London one day. She saw a tall, thin man on the corner, all huddled up and looking totally miserable. Drawing on her innate care and compassion, she went up to the man, shook his hand, and asked him how he was. He looked up at her and said, "Oh! After such a long, long time I feel the warmth of a human hand." And he sat up with a beautiful smile on his face—all because someone was kind to him. Just noticing him, talking to him, shaking his hand had made him feel like a somebody.

What we're talking about here isn't rocket science; it's just the simple act of getting outside

ourselves and caring, genuinely caring about somebody else. Someone has said that part of our calling or mission on this earth is to positively touch others and to care for them. That's what it means for each one of us to be part of the human family.

So it seems to me that each of us needs to ask ourselves, "Who are we going to reach out and touch today?"

Closing:

James Angell has said, "To touch a child's face, a dog's smooth coat, a petaled flower, the rough surface of a rock is to set up new orders of brain motion. To touch is to communicate." Yes, to touch means we see, we care, we connect. Jesus did; are we going to?

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.