

Touch

It's wonderful to be back with you today.

We spent ten days on the mainland.

Much of it in the spirit-filled mountains of Sedona.

And as COVID restrictions eased, there was lots of time to be still, to think about what we used to take for granted.

Something we have desperately missed for a long time: touch.

Fist bumps, elbow bumps and bowing to each other are no replacement for handshakes, kisses and hugs.

Our human need to touch, and to be touched, whether in greeting a friend on the sidewalk, or comforting a loved one dying on a hospital bed, took a real beating since March of 2020.

One wonders if the many acts of senseless violence that are erupting as the pandemic wanes is perhaps partly a consequence of our enforced isolation from one another — an isolation that seems to dehumanize us even as it protected us from the disease.

And so today as our gospel lesson picks up on our long road trip with Jesus, it is fitting indeed that "touch" takes center stage.

First with the woman suffering 12 years of hemorrhaging blood, followed by the 12 year old girl whose blood flow is restored through her encounter with Jesus.

The touch that's center stage in today's gospel lesson isn't simply about physical contact.

The crowds pushing on Jesus get none of what the bleeding woman gets.

The doctors who are treating her, draining her bank account as nature drains her blood supply, certainly make physical contact with the woman, but they don't really touch her.

The touch that heals is a touch that arises out of a sense of faith, a sense of trust, in the one being touched.

The openness that the woman has toward Jesus mirrors the openness Jesus has toward the Father — as openness meets openness — a healing blossoms.

And both Jesus and the woman know it.

The woman feels the bleeding stop as Jesus feels the power of love release into her; a divine connection completes its circuit.

The same is playing out with Jairus, his wife and their little girl.

In the face of ridicule and the hopelessness of death, Jesus urges them not to be afraid...to simply believe.

As Jesus touches the little girl, "talitha cum, little girl, arise."

And the same touch which stops a 12 year flow of blood in the woman restores the flow of blood to this 12 year old girl.

How do **you** deal with touch?

Truth be told, some folks don't like being touched at all.

Others revel in it, need it, seek it out.

When you think about it, touch is perhaps the most human of our five senses.

In a strange way, touch is probably the very best pathway to experiencing the very things that cannot be touched.

Love.

Compassion.

Gentleness and hope.

“Rachel Remen is a doctor who has dedicated her life to humanizing the often sterile world of medicine.

How many stories have we heard from people in the medical profession who entered it hoping to heal the world?

Only a few years later to bemoan the stand-off-ness?

The so-called objectivity.

The over-reliance on tests and machines that separates the doctors humanity from their patients humanity.

So Dr Remen, as she works to tear down those walls, provides seminars to doctors so they can practice the art of touch with one another, and experience firsthand its healing power.

In the course of one seminar, a doctor describes his experience with his fellow physician-participant this way.

'At first I thought I would just play it safe.

But after Jane told me about the pain she usually has in her back, I decided to take a chance and tell her about my divorce, which was recently finalized.

How hard it was for me to trust women.

She asked me where I felt this pain.

And I couldn't actually say the words.

So I touched my heart.

She nodded.

Then Jane put the palm of her hand on my chest.

I was astonished by how warm her hand was.

How gently and tenderly she touched me.

Before long, the warmth of her hand seemed to penetrate my chest, to surround my heart.

That's when something strange happened.

It felt as if she's holding my heart in her hand — rather than just touching my chest.

The strength in her hand, how rock-steady she was, allowed me to feel that she was really there for my pain.

That suddenly, I was no longer alone.

I was safe.

That's when I began to cry." Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels*, 166-7, quoting Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, 240 (modified).

On the other side of this story is the one about the doctor who had a very painful bowel obstruction.

She drove herself 20 miles to the hospital, stopping every ten minutes or so to vomit on the side of the road.

When her colleague asked why she didn't call for help and a ride, the woman said: "You don't know anything about bowel obstructions."

The friend replied: 'Even kids run to someone when they get hurt!'

The woman retorted: 'I've never believed in all that kissy boo-boo stuff!

It doesn't help the pain!'

The friend responded: 'It's not supposed to help the pain: it helps the loneliness!'" Id.

When I worked in a psychiatric hospital as part of my seminary training, one of the biggest groups of patients were those with schizophrenia.

And what the doctors discovered is that the single greatest cause of schizophrenia was to be an infant who was not touched, cuddled and loved.

The absence of touch in those formative years predicted schizophrenia almost automatically.

The same thing happened in Romania when the Soviet Union imploded.

Thousands of infants were warehoused in orphanages with the barest of human contact.

While they grew up looking like human beings, much of what we think of as human was lacking in them.

We are living in times when touching each other, figuratively and literally, seems to be harder and harder to do.

Political lines, religious lines, class and race lines seem to be drawn so deliberately, so firmly, that touching the common humanity that we all of us share seems impossible.

It's not a new problem.

The image on the front of our service bulletin today is a close up of Michelangelo's famous painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome.

It depicts God leaning with all his might toward the newly created Adam, angels holding onto God so he doesn't fall, as God seeks to touch Adam with the tip of God's finger.

Adam, meanwhile, is leaning backwards, yet he needs only lift his finger in the slightest in order to be touched by the finger of God.

And the question this masterpiece of art leaves us with is:

Will we lift that finger?

Will we make that slightest effort to be touched by the finger of God, who so desperately seeks to touch us?

We answer that question to the extent we are willing to touch each other.

Even those, perhaps especially those, with whom we disagree: politically, socially, racially.

As Dorothy Day famously said, "I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least."

Now more than ever, we who claim to follow Christ are called to turn down the hot rhetoric, to try and still the raging waters of disagreement and contempt.

And then to seek, through the gift of touch, those truths that bind all of us together.

The challenge for folks like me these days is this:

Can we see through the fear and insecurity that leads so many to embrace racist instincts?

Can we insist upon gospel values of inclusion, compassion and mercy with the spirit of inclusion, compassion and mercy, toward those with whom we disagree?

If we can, perhaps we too shall find the healing touch of God.

+amen

