

Taking Jesus' Hand

Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, (Feb. 4) 2024

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Growing up in West Texas I heard stories of the Dust Bowl of the early 1930's all my life. My grandparents would tell stories about how bad it was. My mother had memories from her early childhood. I remember my grandmother telling stories of how bad the static electricity was. My great aunt said she knew a woman who hugged her 10-year-old daughter, and both woke up on the ground from being knocked out from the shock. People became afraid to shake hands or give a hug.

Touch is a powerful practice. In the Bible and Christian teaching personal and physical touch is powerful. It can bestow blessing and be conducive to healing and grace. Yet, it can also compel a curse upon a person and lead to destruction and diminishment in life. For good or for bad, touch is powerful.

Contemporary studies to reinforce much of what we've learned from the Bible about the power of touch. Physical touch is about physicality but it is also spiritual, emotional, and mental. It is personal but it is also social, reconnecting us to others and to community relationships, building trust.

For example, there is more going on with sex than "just" the physicality of sex. Sex is mental and emotional but it is also social and spiritual. This is why we have weddings. Weddings bring together the social and spiritual. The community

gathers around a couple as God gives a sacramental blessing to a couple who are forming a new relationship in which they will have sex.

Touch is powerful but it is also complex, and it takes communal wisdom to begin to understand it and to practice it appropriately.

There are all kinds of remarkable studies on the power of touch. We have heard the stories of infants and toddlers deprived of touch and physical holding who have inhibited development. When touched, whether a child or an adult, the body releases neurological chemicals that promote health and well being, while at the same time inhibiting chemicals that cause stress.

Studies show, on the other hand, and these are reinforced by the studies emerging in the aftermath of Covid lockdowns and social distancing, that physical isolation and lack of touch inhibits our ability to accept our own bodies and undermines our trust in others. We compensate by indulging our physical appetites by sexual promiscuity, eating disorders, and addictive behaviors. Part of the studies on the social implications of Covid, recognize the absolute importance of *physical distancing* for the sake of health and safety of each other. At the same time, we are discovering that *social distancing* was not healthy. We cannot isolate from one another without repercussions.

So part of what we're saying is like all of God's gifts, touching can be abused, twisted, and misused, resulting in further damage – physical or emotional or mental, social, and certainly spiritual – which is another way of saying an abusive or misused touch is conducive to what the biblical world would consider cursing instead of blessing. Cursing in the Bible, just like blessing, can ripple outward affecting the whole community.

Michael Polanyi, the 20th century polymath, was concerned that science and philosophy so over emphasized detached, objective knowledge that it limited how and what we can know. Modern objective science is reductionistic, he said. Polanyi said some things can only be known by tacit knowledge, by touch. Tacit knowledge is participatory knowledge. It means that knowing is objective but also subjective. It is detached but also involved, participating, full of touch, and various experiences and perceptions from all sorts of perspectives.

Some things are known but cannot be explained or articulated. How to ride a bicycle or hit a curve ball or create art, for example. Good doctors know about tacit knowledge, too. Dr. Bob Carroll was a deacon in this church and my long-time primary-care physician. One afternoon after Dr. Bob retired, I thought I might be having a heart attack. I was in the ER hooked up to all kinds of monitors and already had been examined by the hospital docs. Word had spread and Dr. Bob came by to see me even though he was retired. He asked me lots more questions that came from him being my primary doctor for 12 to 15 years. He poked me, patted, squeezed, tapped, and asked questions all the time. Finally, he said, “You didn’t have a heart attack I think you pulled a muscle. Now, they’re going to put you in the hospital overnight for observation and in the morning they’ll come in, release you, and say, ‘We think you pulled a muscle but did not have a heart attack.’” Sure enough that’s what happened.

Touch is powerful. And complex.

We are a physically touching congregation. We hug, we shake hands, we hold hands, we touch each other on the shoulder, we anoint with oil. And Barbara has taught us about Healing Touch and healing hands. But we also emphasize and want to be very conscious of appropriate touch and aware of inappropriate touch.

Not everyone is as comfortable with touch as others of us, so we are respectful of one another. We must pay attention to how we hug and where we place our hands. We want to do everything possible to make this a safe place.

Jesus shows us how to touch. And let there be no mistake, Jesus practices touch. For example, his parable of the Good Samaritan is about tacit knowledge, participatory knowledge of our neighbor. It's about getting in the ditch with the injured man. That's what the incarnation is about. Jesus Christ not practicing social distancing and detachment from humanity, but entering into, taking on tacit knowledge, in the flesh, and becoming human.

Here in Mark 1 Jesus is touching and healing right and left. In the passage just preceding our reading this morning, Jesus is in Capernaum in the synagogue where he is confronted with a man with an "unclean spirit." Jesus heals him. Directly, Jesus leaves the synagogue and Mark, using his favorite word, says Jesus immediately goes to Simon Peter's house.

In 2011 I walked this same path. It's about as far from the synagogue to the house as it is from here to the road out front. Jesus goes to the house of Simon Peter whose mother-in-law is sick in bed. Jesus goes into see her and takes her by the hand and heals her. From our perspective, in a kind of amusing way she immediately gets up and starts serving everyone.

Notice that Mark says that Jesus touched her; he took her hand and lifted her up. That's explicit resurrection language – "lifted up." Here was a person raised from the dead.

From the perspective of early Christians, this was the model of what it meant to be a follower of Jesus: we are touched, we are healed, we are raised from the dead, and in turn, we get up and serve others.

Then Mark tells us that evening at sundown, (in other words, after the Sabbath had concluded and it was permissible for people to travel further and do the work otherwise not permitted on the Sabbath) people brought all who were sick or possessed with demons. Everyone gathered outside the door and Mark says, “And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons.”

So here in short order, according to Mark, Jesus heals a possessed man in the synagogue, goes to Simon Peter’s house and touches and heals Peter’s mother-in-law, and then spends the rest of the evening healing the sick and casting out demons.

Sounds like a full day. No wonder that early the next morning Jesus went out alone to a secluded place to pray and be with God.

Notice it seems that Jesus gets tired, too, spiritually, physically, emotionally... Jesus gives and gives, serves and serves, touches and heals until he is at the end of his rope. But Jesus knows what to do about it. He spends time with God.

Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah is one of the most beloved and most beautiful passages in the Bible. It was written to and about people who are at the end of their rope. Who are exhausted and in despair. “Have you not known and have you not heard?” the prophet asks twice (Is. 40:21,28). “The Lord is the everlasting God... He does not faint nor grow weary... He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.” He points out that even the most energetic and vital become tired, “even youths will faint and be weary; and the young will fall exhausted” (v. 30).

“But those who wait upon the Lord...”

Isaiah says that when we wait for the Lord, the Lord shall renew us. Sometimes we will mount up with wings like eagles and soar. Sometimes we'll run and not grow weary. And other times, we will simply be able to keep on walking and not faint.

I wonder if Simon Peter's mother-in-law had been waiting for the Lord. She was sick. Mark says she had a fever. She was in bed, sick, tired, and at the end of her rope.

The Lord shows up and touches her. And she responds by doing what she knows how to do – she gets up and serves.

Jesus did not touch everyone he healed. Sometimes he simply spoke – the power of the spoken word. But it seems he particularly touched if he could and especially if the healing involved breaking the isolation or exclusion of someone. Healing involves wholeness and wholeness means reincorporating into the community. Jesus touched, broke the isolation and lifted up so that we might be part of God's beloved community.

This morning we are invited to be open our hands in order to receive mercy, to receive grace, to receive the bread and cup. We are invited to take the hand of Jesus. And this day, the hand of Jesus leads us to take each other's hands by sharing food through our potluck.

In 1932 the Black composer Thomas Dorsey lost his wife while she was giving birth to their son and the next day he lost the infant son. In the midst of the deep grief, he wrote: *Precious Lord, take my hand Lead me on, let me stand I am tired, I am weak, I am worn Through the storm, through the night Lead me on, to the light, Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.*

This song became Martin Luther King's favorite song. He used to get Mahalia Jackson to sing it at the mass rallies in churches. In fact, Dr. King's very last words, just before he was shot, while standing on the hotel balcony, he spoke to the musician who was going to play that night, "Ben, make sure you play 'Take my hand precious Lord' in the meeting tonight. Play it real pretty." Of course, Mahalia Jackson sang it at Dr. King's funeral.

What Martin Luther King had learned is what Thomas Dorsey learned, that like Simon Peter's mother-in-law, there are times when we are at the end of our ropes.

John Claypool, who lost his ten-year-old daughter to leukemia said that when he reached the end of his rope, he discovered that God lives at the end of our ropes. He said he learned to reach out and take Jesus' hand.

May it be so with us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.