

“Reach Out and Touch Someone”

Luke 5:12-16

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • October 30, 2016

This morning I want to talk about a very “touchy” subject. No, I don’t mean politics. For the past couple of months we have been discussing off and on the five senses and how we use them to know God better and today we’ve come to the fifth and final message in this series. We’re talking about the sense of touch. Your skin is the largest organ in the human body and it does way more than just hold your insides in. Your skin contains a huge network of nerve endings and touch receptors that allow you to feel even the slightest changes in temperature and pressure. But there’s more to the sense of touch than just feeling hot or cold, fast or slow, hard or soft, smooth or rough, pain or pleasure. Touch is the first of the senses to develop in infants and it is the most important of the senses throughout our lives. Touch is powerful. And most powerful is the touch between humans.

It turns out that touch is actually an essential human need. A number of studies have been conducted on human touch and yet they’re still just beginning to “scratch” the surface of understanding touch. For example, researchers have found that premature infants who received 15 minutes of loving contact with caregivers three times a day for a week gained 47% more weight than those who received standard levels of care. And infants whose parents touched them more had more advanced brain development. Other studies have found that if that physical affection continues through childhood, there are lower rates of adult physical violence.

But the benefits of human touch aren’t limited to infants and children. Let’s talk about some research that you can use. The Spurs kicked off their season this past week winning all three of their games. You may have noticed the way athletes will sometimes pat each other on the back or high five. One psychologist studied this physical contact between teammates on NBA basketball teams. What he

discovered is that the teams with the most on-court touching early in the season were more likely to be successful. The researcher, a guy named Michael Kraus, said, “We were very surprised. Touch predicted performance across all the NBA teams.”

Probably the most important research in the area of human touch is what happens in your body. When we touch each other lovingly, our bodies respond by releasing neurological chemicals like oxytocin and serotonin. Those chemicals make us feel good. They make us feel close to the other person, too. At the same time, touch can cause our levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, to decrease. And not only do you feel better, it can make you healthier.

In a study released last year, researchers at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh exposed over 400 people to the common cold virus and then studied the effect of hugs. What they found was that the people who received the hugs were significantly less likely to get sick and those who did had fewer symptoms. Clearly, the way to get over a cold is to hug more people. They may not appreciate it as much as you, but at least *you’ll* feel better. The point is that healthy physical contact – hugs, handshakes, pats on the back – actually have the power to affect our physical, mental, and emotional health. We were made to be touched.

When we look at the Bible we discover that at the heart of the Gospel is a God who touches us. God is a touching God. John 1:14 says, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” God so loved the world, He so loved you and me, that he put on skin. He lived as one of us. He was born in the usual human way with all the same needs for human touch that you and I have. The Incarnation shows us a God who came to touch and be touched.

Luke chapter 5 begins with Jesus calling his first disciples and then the next thing we read is that a man “full of leprosy” came to Jesus and begged to be healed. In the ancient world,

leprosy didn't just refer to what we now call Hansen's Disease. Leprosy included all kinds of skin diseases and infections. Because they could be so contagious God had given the Israelites specific rules to keep it from spreading. As part of those rules, the infected person had to live outside the city and was required to keep away from others. If someone started to come close to them they were to yell, "unclean, unclean!" And if someone touched a leper he would be considered unclean. Leprosy cut the person off physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

This man says, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." We know from other places in the Gospels that all Jesus would have to do is say the word and the man would be healed. But verse 13 says, "Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him." Jesus didn't need to touch the man to heal his disease. Jesus touched him to heal his heart. By touching him, Jesus identified with him. He connected with him. Who knows how long it had been since that man had experienced any kind of human touch. We're told that immediately the leprosy left him.

Jesus told him to go and show himself to the priest and make the prescribed offering for his cleansing. The priests were the ones who had the authority to determine if someone was healed or not. They also were the ones who had the authority to let the person back into society. When Jesus healed the man's body he also healed his spirit and his social life. Jesus heals the whole person, body, mind and soul, all with his touch.

There's an epidemic in our society today. And it's worse than leprosy. *The British Medical Journal* published an article not long ago titled "The No Touching Epidemic—an English Disease." They pointed out that because people experience less physical interaction they end up with a greater "sense of isolation and loneliness, insecurity, emotional inhibition, and inability to communicate with neighbors." Tiffany Field, who is the director of the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami, believes that "a lack of healthy touching among students and adults is causing real problems"

and may explain "why sexual promiscuity and teenage pregnancy are on the increase." She says the lack of appropriate human touch "could even explain the increasing incidence of eating disorders and addictive behaviors."

There are a couple of reasons for the loss of touching. One is the harm that comes from inappropriate touching. Physical and sexual abuse scandals have caused us to be wary of any kind of touching. Also, over the last few decades, our culture has made touching primarily sexual, which also leads to the idea that it's inappropriate. One school district in Canada even issued a guideline that "there is no safe touch when you work with children."

I think this is where the Christian Church has something to say. We believe that our bodies are a gift from God, that they are holy, and that they are created good. We recognize that God is a touching God and that he came here to touch us. The Church is the Body of Christ. We are the hands of Jesus in our world. If we can learn to touch one another in healthy ways we can begin to offer an alternative to the culture of isolation that is so harmful.

So what would healthy touch look like? It begins by being intentional about touching in appropriate ways and it begins at home. If you are married, make a point to lovingly touch your spouse every day. Hold hands. Give back rubs. Hug often. If you have young children at home find ways to show them affection. Hold them often. Scratch their back before they go to sleep.

Then begin to look for ways to touch other people. Over and over again in the Bible we find people embracing one another. In the story of the Prodigal Son Jesus says when the son came home the father ran to him, embraced him and kissed him. This is not a foreign concept for you. This is an affectionate church. You are already doing this. But from now on recognize that it's more than just being friendly. You're bringing the presence of Christ to that person. Be intentional about it. Think about those people who live alone. Make an effort to give them a hug or hold their hand. Go visit the

people in the nursing homes or who are homebound. Think about how little personal touch they experience. And don't forget to hug people who have colds.

The last thing I want to point out is that when you touch someone they aren't the only ones to benefit. You also receive all the benefits.

The lower heart rate and lower stress levels, the higher feel-good chemicals, you receive all the same benefits that you are providing for that person. And you are bringing the presence of Christ. So reach out and touch someone.

Amen.