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Mark 1:40-45
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The Power of Physical Touch

We're going to begin today's sermon with a trivia question: What is the largest organ of your body? (*Answer: the skin*)

If you an average adult, your skin covers about 21 square feet. It will weigh 9 pounds and contain more than 11 miles of blood vessels.

If you think you look bad in the mirror with no clothes on... imagine how bad you'd look without any skin.

Your skin holds your body together, and protects you from various dangerous bacteria and viruses.

In hot weather, your skin will release as much as 3 gallons of sweat a day. However, your eardrums, your lips, and your nail beds will not sweat.

And you really need to clean up after yourselves. Your skin sheds 50,000 cells every minute.

Globally, dead skin accounts for about a billion tons of dust in the atmosphere.

One of the primary other functions of your skin is to help you "feel" the world around you.

There are at least 5 different types of receptors in the skin that help us to respond to pain and to touch.

And in blind people, the brain becomes rewired so they can better respond to stimulus received through touch and hearing.

Thus, the blind literally "see" the world thru touch and sound.

The ability to touch and "feel" the world around us is an essential human need. And is truly a very special creation by God.

When we shake hands or put an arm across a friend's shoulder, the body releases neurological chemicals like oxytocin and serotonin that feel good, while also inhibiting chemicals that cause stress.

When babies and children are deprived of touch, their brain development is permanently impaired, which can destroy the growth of social abilities and result in lower intelligence.

Historical documents reveal a crude and very cruel thirteenth-century study in which Frederick II, the German emperor, wondered what language children would speak if they were never spoken to.

So, he selected several newborns in an orphanage and instructed nurses to feed them, but not to talk to them or touch them.

Every single one of those babies died.

Dr. Fritz Talbot conducted a more scientific study regarding the effects of touch on babies in the 1940s and established a conclusive connection between touch and an infant's ability to thrive.

Obviously, from the moment we're first plopped on this spinning orb called Earth, we need a loving, literal connection with someone else who's wearing a suit of skin too.

Physical touch is not just important to babies, but to teenagers, and adults, too. Physical touch is very significant.

Holding hands, embracing, kissing, back rubs, an arm around the shoulder, a pat on the back, for lovers — sexual intimacy, are all expressions of love.

For those whose love language is physical touch, those “love touches” are their emotional lifeline.

This morning we continue with our sermon series on “The 5 Love Languages” by talking about one of my wife’s love languages: PHYSICAL TOUCH.

There are times when it is almost instinctive and natural to hug another, and that is in a time of crisis. It is then, more than at any other time, when we need to feel loved.

We cannot always change events, but we can survive if we feel loved! And physical touch is a universal way of expressing that care and comfort.

In time of crises, people don’t really want explanations, or words or sermons or lectures!

What they really want is just an indication of your love and concern – like I said, maybe it’s a hug, or just someone to sit with them and hold their hand.

These expressions of care will be remembered and appreciated far more than any words.

Now, I understand that some of you may have been harmed in the past or even right now, by physical touch, and so a sermon like this can be a little uncomfortable or uneasy.

I am so sorry that this has happened to you. Please know that physical and or sexual abuse is NEVER okay.

But God created physical touch to be a loving way to communicate to another person.

Physical touch is one way that people can give and receive and communicate love.

Touch is one of God's gifts to us—to help us thrive. But there are many ways to abuse it, other than the obvious ways.

In our community, we have incredibly different sensitivities when it comes to touch.

Out of all the love languages, this one takes the most sensitivity, as it should. For those for whom physical touch is your primary love language, it helps to be aware of a couple of factors.

One factor is culture. Some family cultures have a more open view of touch than others.

One may see it as a communication of love and care. Another may see it as a tremendous invasion of privacy and respect.

Another factor is personality. Some may be gregarious in their affection. Others experience it as intrusion.

There are many layers to this simple language. We need to be aware what our love languages are communicating.

And since everything we do communicates something. We need to make sure we are communicating what we intend.

A touch can certainly communicate the emotion of love. A certain touch can communicate physical attraction.

A touch can communicate value. A touch can communicate acceptance.

A touch can communicate security and assurance. A touch can communicate an apology. A touch can communicate compassion or sorrow for another.

A touch can show respect. A touch can say unspoken words of 'thank you' when words are not needed.

And, I think, it's comforting to know that God also speaks the love language of PHYSICAL TOUCH!

Sometimes that 'touch' may be in the form or shape of an intense inner experience or feeling – while at other times it may be literally, physical.

The Gospels describe Jesus himself as a toucher. There are multiple cases in which Jesus reached out and embraced people, when a simple nod or quick word could have sufficed.

When the disciples tried to keep little children from interacting with Jesus (like most kids, they probably had sticky hands and dirty knees and, therefore, the disciples thought they were too messy to interact with the Messiah), Jesus beckoned them to pile onto his lap. And he put his hands on them and blessed them.

Jesus' life was one of continually making physical contact with people, even when it was culturally or religiously frowned upon.

Jesus made some mud and put it on the blind man's eyes, and he could see.

When Peter's mother-in law was sick with fever, Jesus "touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him."

And followers of Jesus have been serving, and healing and touching in his name ever since.

Certainly, Jesus was on to something – for study after study shows that healing touch lowers blood pressure, decreases pain, and speeds up the healing process.

People who are exposed to healing touch in hospitals are released more quickly.

In our second Gospel text this morning, Jesus was in a no-touch situation. A man afflicted with leprosy came to Jesus—begging to be healed.

Leprosy was a terrible disease.

If untreated, those who have leprosy can expect to live an average of ten years.

It usually starts with a feeling of fatigue and pain in the joints. Scaly spots develop on the skin, and the body becomes covered with lumps filled with puss.

The face changes its shape, so that the sufferer would come to resemble a lion.

Growths develop on the vocal chords so that the leper voice becomes raspy. The body begins to decompose, and the leper develops a terrible stench.

The disease also attacks the nervous system, compromising the body's ability to feel pain.

The leper might step on a stone or a thorn and injure his foot but be totally unaware that there's a problem. Infection sets in and eventually, the injured foot might just fall off.

Or the leper might try to wash his face in scalding water and blind himself.

Or he might reach into a fire to pick up a dropped potato and not realize he'd been burned.

The Law in Jesus' day left little room for nuance. There were two categories when it came to holiness: clean and unclean. Never the twain shall meet.

According to the Levitical code, the Law handed down by Moses, one infected with leprosy must wear torn clothes, keep his hair unkempt, cover the lower part of his face, and cry out, "Unclean, unclean" whenever others were near.

He must live outside of town—so as not to infect others.

They were “unclean” – forbidden to enter the Temple; forbidden even to have contact with their loved ones.

Lepers were not to touch... or be touched by anyone. To touch a leper was to expose yourself to the disease and risk being infected. And NOBODY really wanted to touch them anyway.

The Jews might not have known a particular individual was a tax collector. They may not have always known when they passed a prostitute.

BUT the man who had leprosy carried his disease on his body. He couldn't hide his sickness from the crowds.

Jesus, though, ignored the social/spiritual mores of the time and touched the leper. And the text says, immediately the leper was made clean.

But the real story here is NOT only that Jesus healed the leper. The real story here was also that Jesus TOUCHED the man.

Of course, Jesus healed many people, but Jesus DIDN'T HAVE TO touch people to heal them. All Jesus had to do was speak and people would be healed.

For example, in Luke 17:12-14 we're told of the time that Jesus met 10 lepers in village in Samaria.

He didn't touch them. Instead he told them to go see the priest... and on their way, there they were healed.

Jesus never touched those lepers. But he touched this man. Why?

Why touch this man – this man deformed by this horrible and unclean disease - when He really didn't have to?

Well... notice what it says in verse 41

“Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the man...”

There was something this man needed that others didn't. This man NEEDED MORE than just healing. He NEEDED to be touched.

Since the first century, thousands of men and women have claimed to have been touched by God. They in turn have reached out and touched others.

Not just those working in rescue missions befriending the homeless; in drug and alcohol centers bringing new hope to the hopeless, or in hospitals and hospices bringing comfort to the sick and the dying.

They are also the ordinary people like you and me who will simply put an arm around those in need.

These people, ordinary people, are channels of God's love, speaking fluently the love language of physical touch. They speak God's Language!

Jesus came to show his great love. We get to share that love with one another. So much of our faith is intangible.

We worship the invisible God. But Jesus came to us in the flesh. The early disciples handed down that experience to us. They wrote:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.” (1 John 1:1)

They touched the very healing hands of God. They placed their fingers in his nail pierced hands.

Now we are the body of Christ, and all members of it. We are his hands and feet.

God did not make our hands to hurt. He made our hands to heal. We can be the healing hands of God.

If we’re going to learn to love like Jesus loved... we need to learn to touch others as Jesus touched us.

Before I close let me be perfectly clear – it is NEVER okay to touch someone that does not want to be touched. And it is NEVER okay to use your power to touch someone who can’t say no.

That being said, Jesus calls us to be people who are determined to touch people who need to be touched.

So, who do you need to speak this language to? Who around you needs to experience a touch from you? A spouse? A family member? A friend? A co-worker?

My challenge this morning is that you let God touch them through you!

Amen!