

Good cold Sunday morning from a hill in Rockport.....

Today my sermon is about the power of touch. Jesus touched a lot of people two thousand years ago, and look what happened! And today, because of a vicious virus, we are told over and over to not touch, to not get close to one another, to stay in our family “bubbles” and not congregate with others, even to watch the Super Bowl this evening!

Last week I was in Reny’s in Belfast, intent on looking at something in one of the housewares aisles, not realizing someone had walked into the same aisle behind me. I accidentally bumped into her – my “end” touching her “end.” I turned and said, “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know anyone was behind me!” And she responded, “Oh, that’s o.k.! That was the closest thing I’ve had to a hug since last March!” We both laughed, of course, and then knew what she meant about not being touched, by anyone, since last March....

We’re living in a time when we are realizing in new, unexpected and unwanted ways, the power of touch, the loss we feel in not being able to touch, the longing we have to touch again.... someday.... I look forward to the Sunday when, again, we can be close, we can touch one another, we can newly appreciate the power of touch to say so much.... so much that we took for granted before last March. Look forward with me. The Sunday will come when we can be together in physical presence, in sacred presence, in the healing presence of touch....

I know I’ve said this before, **AND** I want to say again how much I appreciate all your responses to my meditations, especially in these challenging times. I don’t always get a chance to respond to each of your reflections, **AND** please know I read all of them, ponder them, and give thanks for them.... Your support spurs me on and gives me hope for the future of us all....

Blessings to each one on this first Sunday of February..... Susan

p.s. I will ATTEMPT, AGAIN, to download today’s scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page later today: freerangepastor for anyone who wants to tune in..... and I believe Margie is also downloading my sermons to Federated’s Facebook page.... Lately downloading to Facebook has been a “hit or miss” affair!

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, February 7, 2021
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

A Call to Worship

As we come to recognize meaning in the unfolding drama of our lives,
God our Creator appears.

We begin to see the patterns that emerge
in the lives of those who serve and are served by God.

May we live out our callings in ways which balance
our worship and our service even in these challenging times
of being distant from one another in the flesh,
but never distant in spirit.

May the spirit of God touch us continually and without fail....
Let us worship God.

“A Prayer for Fortitude”

O God, give me strength to live another day.
Let me not turn coward before its difficulties or prove disloyal to its duties.

Let me not lose faith in my companions.

Keep me sweet and sound of heart,
in spite of ingratitude, treachery, or meanness.
Preserve me from minding little stings or giving them.

Help me to keep my heart clean,
and to live so honestly and fearlessly
that no outward failure can dishearten me
or take away the joy of conscious integrity.
Open wide the eyes of my soul that I may see good in all things.

Grant me this day some new vision of truth,
inspire me with the spirit of joy and gladness,
and make me the cup of strength to suffering souls;
in your name, our strength in all times.

Amen.

*adapted from a prayer by Phillips Brooks,
in *A Pocket Prayer Book & Devotional Guide*, 1941

Readings of Scripture – Mark 1:29-34

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he

cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

"He came and took her by the hand..."

A sermon based on Mark 1:29-34

Will you pray with me. Compassionate God, touch us this morning. Help us feel your breath on our necks and sense your holy arms around us, even as we worship apart from one another in physical space and time. Help us believe in your presence... even when we doubt and despair over your seeming absence from us. Amen.

When you hear the sentiment, "That was very touching..." what do you think? What does it mean to be touched by something – an event or a person's actions? If we were together, in the flesh, I would ask for your responses to those questions.

When I am touched by something – I'm usually in tears as a result. I often think of Fred Buechner's response when a young woman asked him to describe what is holy in life. Being in his eightieth decade now, and having experienced many years of pastoring and teaching as a Presbyterian minister and authoring many books, he responded, "When something brings a tear to my eye or a lump in my throat, I know I've experienced something of the holy." To be touched in most all ways... it seems to me... is to experience something of the holy.

The healing of Simon's mother-in-law of a fever in our passage for today is one of Jesus' first healings in his ministry, it's the second one actually – the first one being an exorcism of an evil spirit from a man, which as I'm sure you remember, we thought about last Sunday.

The verse that stands out for me in our passage for this morning is this one, "He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her and she began to serve them." (Mk 1:31) Jesus entered this private home, the home of two of his first named disciples, Simon and Andrew. He took the hand of a woman he didn't know, a woman who says nothing in the passage, a woman who was sick

but didn't ask for healing. He saw her. He took her hand. He lifted her up, and she was relieved of her fever. Then she began to serve him and his companions.

No name. No asking for help. No words spoke by the person with the fever. No crying out with phrases like, "Why me, O God? Why do I have this sickness?" or, "Heal me, relieve me of this fever!" Just a human being quietly, silently in need, noticed by a man of great power and compassion. A touch is made. No words are spoken. But that touch heals.

One of the great quiet and understated teachings of the Bible, it seems to me, is the power of touch – physical touch, emotional and mental touch, spiritual touch. We *want* to be touched, but so often we don't know how to ask for that touch, or we're afraid we'll be rebuked or refused if we ask for it, or that we'll make others feel embarrassed if we ask to be touched, or that we'll be accused of asking for an inappropriate touch. God knows there is rampant abuse of touch in ministry, business and government. It's not just some Catholic priests who use touch to satisfy personal immoral needs.

And yet Jesus, throughout his ministry, and throughout the past two thousand years, has offered us the teaching that touch is important, touch is vital to life. The artist Michelangelo was quoted to have said, "To touch can be to give life." Jesus' touch, right at the beginning of his ministry, gave life to a woman ailing with a fever. His touch affected so many people that his reputation for healing preceded him most everywhere he went.

One of my other favorite verses in the Gospels comes from the story of the woman who came to Jesus for healing. Standing in a large crowd around Jesus, she was able to reach out and touch the hem of his robe. The story says he felt energy go out of him, so much so that he said, "Who touched me?" (Luke 8:45)

Sometimes after church on Sunday mornings, back in the day when we had physical, in person church prior to March 15th of last year, or after I've been out visiting a number of people, again prior to March 15th of last year, I feel drained of energy, not in a bad way, but just drained. I realize then *I* am the one who has been touched in deep ways by many people on Sunday mornings, and in nursing settings.

Touch is both energy draining, and life giving. Touch is both simple and hard to offer and to receive... yet it is vital to life. Studies have been done around the necessity of infants being touched in their first few weeks and months of life. Without that touch, they do not thrive. Jesus knew that, without the results of

any studies. Without touch, people do not thrive. And so, touching was a central aspect of Jesus' ministry.

When we come together to remember someone who has died, I am reminded that it is around the time of death that touch can be most powerful and healing – the physical touch of a hand on a shoulder... the emotional touch of a listening ear to one who has lost a parent, a partner, a child, a good friend... the spiritual touch of one who understands and believes that just because the physical breath has stopped in a person doesn't mean their holy life is over, or that the memories of them are erased.

Physical, emotional and spiritual touch are vital to life. They were vital to Jesus. I believe they're vital to us. Perhaps most important in life is the touch that comes when we feel understood in our grief and loss, when we have tears in our hearts for those we can no longer see with our eyes or hear with our ears or touch with our hands. And now, since last March 15th, we have been advised over and over, stay apart, wear a mask, don't touch.... in order to avoid this vicious covid virus that has killed too many and left life long scars in too many others....

Jesus touched thousands of people during his brief lifetime. He traveled a lot – he had a lot of ground to cover in his short time in ministry. Throughout the past two thousand years, Jesus has been preaching and healing and delivering in many ways the message of God's love for all of humanity through touch of many kinds.

We don't have to identify ourselves as Christians to have a claim on this power, this gift. Some of the people who have had the greatest impact on me in my life, who have touched me in the most important and intimate ways, would not identify themselves as Christians, or even as people following any particular faith tradition.

Each one of us has the power, the gift, of touch within us – the touch of a hand, the touch of a listening ear, the touch of a compassionate heart. All of that touch, it seems to me, comes from the heart of God that beats within each of us.

Someone sent me a You Tube piece sometime ago about the aftermath of the earthquakes in Japan some years ago.^[1] The first half of the film is about what happened on those first days – the devastation, the deaths, the destruction... so many losses of all kinds. The second half was about the thank you's, *Arigato* in Japanese, that came from Japanese people of all ages to people of all ages around the world who came to help. *Arigato* spoken by Japanese children in schools who thanked their teachers, both those who lived and those who died in the earthquake,

the working Japanese people, the old Japanese people – all saying *Arigato* with smiles on their faces as they looked into the camera lens.

As I sat watching this film on my laptop, I was touched... indeed, in tears. Some cynics might say it was all for effect that the film was made and that it was just a visual description of the devastation and disaster after the earthquakes in Japan, that's all... a way to get people to donate money for the cause. No touch of anything holy... the earthquakes were just the reality of nature gone awry.

But isn't it funny, in a holy kind of way, that when disaster strikes we are drawn to touching others in ways we wouldn't even think of or dare to when there is no disaster before us. Nature gone awry, human error, a nameless woman with a fever, sickness and death... all seem to lead us to touching one another when we wouldn't otherwise. Isn't that funny, in a holy kind of way?

Let the people say, "Amen."

To hold in our prayers this day.....

And hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus....

And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs and alcohol among their members....

And all those who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.....

And pray for our new President, and Congress, that they might do the right things in office for the betterment and future of all of us.....

And add to our prayers, Mike Sodano, who has had three-way bypass surgery this week, a friend of Mimi's and known to many in Thomaston, **extended family members of Sandra Caron who all had the covid virus and have recovered!** – Allie in Maryland, and Dan and his wife and stepson in Buffalo, NY; "Cody," who doesn't live locally but needs prayers for guidance; and continued prayers for Hank Cary, Ed Lee, Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine,

Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday.....

AND those you would like for me to remove from this list.

A Benediction

*Life is short, no matter the length of our days.
We do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those
who make the way with us.
So be swift to love.
Make haste to be kind.
And may the creator of us all,
the redeemer of us all,
and the sustainer of us all
be with you now and forever.
Amen.*

(adapted from the words of Henri Frederic Amiel, 1821 – 1881,
Swiss moral philosopher, poet & critic)

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

For Sunday, February 14, 2021 – Transfiguration Sunday

2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

Words to ponder today about “touch”.....

“Touch has a memory.” ~ John Keats, 1795 – 1821, English Romantic poet

“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all which have the potential to turn a life around.” ~ Leo F. Buscaglia, 1924 – 1998, American author, motivational speaker and professor

“Something in your past wants to be touched, healed.” ~ Tiana Clark, American poet

*“There is something about that touch, that act of consecration, which turns a prayer into a pulse that ripples down to the toes. Just as God comes to us through water and wine, God comes to us through touch, through the holy acts of holy hands. Through touch, God gave us the power to injure or to heal, to wage war or to wash feet. Let us not forget the gravity of that. Let us now forget the call.” ~ Rachel Held Evans, 1981 – 2019, in *Search for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church**

“One cannot dismiss as insignificant the number of times the Scriptures refer to touching.”

~ P. C. Enniss, Theologian in Residence at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA

[1]Google “Arigato from Japan Earthquake Victims – You Tube” to watch this film.