

04/27/14 – Easter 2A

“The Sense of Touch: Jesus Embodied” Rev Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Acts 2:14a, 22-32; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-32

When I worked at Wells Fargo Bank, two of the women on my floor were from Eastern Europe. Katrina was from Lithuania and Danya was from Russia. They were friendly and talkative and seemed to get along well with everyone, even on the phones. One of the things that stood out with both of them was when we would go out to lunch or someplace after work. Whoever either Katrina or Danya were sitting next to, they would get in close, so their leg was touching yours. Whenever they wanted to say something or found something interesting, they would touch your arm or shoulder. They were very 'touchy'.

I like my personal space. But so do most Americans. When businesses send people from Africa, India or Eastern Europe over here, they now train them in American customs. One of the training protocols is honoring 'personal space' and limiting touching.

When I was in seminary, I had to go to two all-day seminars on touching. They mostly said, “Don't”. I get it. Bad things happen and ministers are in public positions and touch is intimate. What a tragic loss, though. The reason touch is so easily misused and misinterpreted is because, unlike most of the other senses, touch bypasses interpretation in the brain. We want to touch and we want to be touched – and we should, as free individuals, be able to determine how much on our own. Personal space should always be honored, but not at the expense of touch.

As scientists are more able to observe animals in their natural habitat without intervention, they notice that the need for touch is universal for all living creatures. It is healing and it is comforting. Elephants, dolphins, apes, adorable little monkeys, wolves – any animal that lives with other animals expect and seek the touch of their friends and family.

Touch is such a strange sense of the body. Millions of nerves run through the largest organ of the body, the skin. Pressure, movement, hot, cold, pain, pleasure, soft, hard – at every moment your nervous system is receiving information about touch. Underneath all that information, without you even knowing it, your brain is determining whether the communication demands a response. You only really get to know what is touching you when you decide to respond to it. Sometimes the mechanism for responding to touch does not appear to be completely functional. My sister used to worry about my niece, Lily. She never expressed pain. Skinned knees. Bumps to the body. Falls. Lily never cried. Once, she fell off a see-saw and cut herself up. She hit the ground, rolled over and took a deep breath, stood up and said, “*I think I am alright!*” This was when she was about 3 years old.

Take a moment now, though, to open yourself to the experience of touch. What do you notice about sitting, how your clothes feel on your body, what your fingers are touching, how the air in the room feels against your skin? Is your body touching someone else's? What is that like?

Once we open up our awareness to the sense of touch, we notice there is a lot going on. All that stuff going on is happening mostly without us knowing about it. Touch is how we know, for better or worse, that we are living in a body, in a material world. As we talk about what Resurrection means for us, we need to

always remember that bodies matter to God, that Resurrection takes place in the physical world. It is a spiritual event in a material world. The Psalmist quoted by Peter today has a glimmer of what it means to live in the presence of Christ's Resurrection when he says, *"My flesh will live in hope"*.

Living in hope in the flesh is the promise of Jesus' Resurrection. All the disciples experience that hope when Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit upon them in the room in Jerusalem when he appears to them after that first Easter. Except for Thomas. We aren't told where Thomas is – all we know is he has missed the experience itself. He demands to experience the same thing the other disciples have experienced, but he has to wait a whole week. *"I will not believe until I can touch the wounds of Jesus"*, he says. When Jesus comes to him, he tells him to touch him and do not doubt, but believe. It is as if Jesus says to Thomas, *"I will do whatever you need me to do and will allow you to do whatever you need to do in order to believe in me. I will do whatever is needed to resolve your doubts."*

Thomas does as Jesus asks and not only believes, but confesses. Thomas, of all the disciples, makes the first creedal, covenantal and confessional statement in the New Testament. He says, *"My Lord and my God!"* Our church covenant, the Apostles' Creed, the Westminster Confession, the Nicene Creed, the Kansas City Statement of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism – all of them have as their foundation Thomas' answer to Jesus' call to touch him.

Touching Christ is a gateway into understanding, as Peter says, that God has *"given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ"*. The act of touch through Jesus Christ becomes spiritual. Saint Bonaventure calls it 'spiritual touch' and what he means when he says that is what Saint Augustine meant in his commentary about Thomas: we touch not just Christ's flesh but his divinity as well. In Christ, in our confession of Jesus as our Lord and our God, the touch we receive and the touch we give becomes *sacramental*. Remember, a *sacrament* is a gift given with a blessing. Another way to say it is that a sacrament is a gift of God's grace. The more we can understand our fundamental expressions of knowing the world as a sacrament, the more attentive we will be to the presence of God in the world and the love of others required when we do find God in the world.

As we scan through the Gospels, we see how important the act of touch is. The verb 'to touch' is used more than 30 times throughout the Gospels. Think of Jairus' daughter. *"If only you will lay your hands upon her..."*, Jairus says to Jesus. Think of the man blind from birth. Jesus touches his eyes and he sees. Think of the man born deaf and mute. Jesus touches his ears and his tongue and he hears and speaks.

And then think of all the people who want to touch Jesus. Think of the hemorrhaging woman who touches the hem of Jesus' cloak. *"Who has touched me? I felt my power leave me"*, Jesus says. When he finds out, Jesus tells the woman, *"Your faith has made you well."* Or, *"Your faith in the healing power of touching me has made you well."* The Gospel of Luke can't tell all the stories about touch, so the writer simply wraps it up in a few verses:

*All the people had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.*

When we have a sacramental understanding of our senses, powerful things happen. We become sensitive to not only the gifts we receive from the presence of Christ in the world, but also the gifts we are able to give because of Christ working through us. With the sense of touch, we begin to participate in the healing power of Jesus for others. With Thomas as our example, we have a sacramental example of the power of touch. Touching Jesus Christ leads to belief in Jesus Christ, and so we, to paraphrase Paul in Acts 17, seek God to touch God. We understand, with Thomas, that in the shadow of the Resurrection, we touch not only the physical aspect of things and people, but also the spiritual, divine aspect of things and people as well.

This is why touch is so powerful. And this is why touch requires respect – respect of personal space, respect of personal freedom and respect of boundaries. You, as the one seeking to touch the divine in the material world, are not the one who gets to determine the personal space, freedom or boundaries of the other person. The other person gets to decide that. And if someone is seeking to touch you, you are the one who gets to determine your personal space, freedom and boundaries.

But you see what just happened there? By respecting touch as a sacramental act, touch as a way of coming into direct contact with the Risen Christ in the world, I have just taken a sacramental approach to others. Only by recognizing the spiritual power of touch and its capacity to heal and comfort do I also begin to recognize the dignity of other people. When I recognize the dignity of the other, I respect their space, their freedom and their boundaries. Touch becomes holy when we are seeking God in the world, when we are trying to live in the presence of the Resurrection. This is what Saint Augustine means when he says we seek “*to touch Jesus spiritually with the heart*”.

The sense of touch is exceptionally sensitive, as are all the senses God has given us. With each sense, we will be seeking to connect it with the power of Christ's resurrection. Touch, though, is how we express intimacy, friendship, love and care for another. When Christ is added to the act of touch, the sense becomes a vehicle for healing, for comfort and for affection. We begin to sense the Incarnation of God in the world, the imposition of the Divine into the Physical. The poet Anne Sexton expresses the sacramental view of touch in her poem *The Touch*:

*The Touch*  
Anne Sexton

*For months my hand had been sealed off  
in a tin box. Nothing was there but subway railings.  
Perhaps it is bruised, I thought,  
and that is why they have locked it up.  
But when I looked it lay there quietly.  
You could tell time by this, I thought,  
Like a clock, by its five knuckles  
and the thin underground veins.  
It lay there like an unconscious woman  
fed by tubes she knew not of.*

*The hand had collapsed,  
a small wood pigeon  
that had gone into seclusion.  
I turned it over and the palm was old,  
its lines traced like fine needlepoint  
and stitched up into the fingers.  
It was fat and soft and blind in places.  
Nothing but vulnerable.*

*And all this is metaphor.  
An ordinary hand—just lonely  
for something to touch  
that touches back.  
The dog won't do it.  
Her tail wags in the swamp for a frog.  
I'm no better than a case of dog food.  
She owns her own hunger.  
My sisters won't do it.  
They live in school except for buttons  
and tears running down like lemonade.  
My father won't do it.  
He comes with the house and even at night  
he lives in a machine made by my mother  
and well oiled by his job, his job.*

*The trouble is  
that I'd let my gestures freeze.  
The trouble was not  
in the kitchen or the tulips  
but only in my head, my head.*

*Then all this became history.  
Your hand found mine.  
Life rushed to my fingers like a blood clot.  
Oh, my carpenter,  
the fingers are rebuilt.  
They dance with yours.  
They dance in the attic and in Vienna.  
My hand is alive all over America.  
Not even death will stop it,  
death shedding her blood.  
Nothing will stop it, for this is the kingdom  
and the kingdom come.*

*Amen.*