



Journey into Touching

Week 4: 22 March 2009

Theme of the Week

Touch leads spiritually to healing or hurt.



STARTING OUT

Reach out!

We are social beings who need to relate to others. For many people, loneliness or isolation is as bad as being ill, hungry or thirsty. People have sometimes been kept in solitary confinement as a punishment or to make them talk; being out of contact with others can be hard to bear.

Reaching out and touching others is not only a profoundly important part of our human experience it is also part of our spirituality. We share and show love by touching. We comfort and console by touching. We are intimate with our partners by touching. We experience closeness with our parents, children, siblings, other family members and friends when we embrace. Touch experiences can bring intense feelings of mutual love, peace and joy.

The first task: to find a frontier. I am not, after all, everything.

Archbishop Rowan Williams

Christian healing is accompanied by the laying on of hands, as Jesus did. At important moments in our Christian journey, such as baptism, confirmation, marriage and at our death, we can be ritually touched in blessing or forgiveness and know that God is with us. For many Christians these moments are both precious and memorable and give them a sense of worth and dignity before God.

Lent itself may begin with a touch experience, when on Ash Wednesday Christians come to church to receive the sign of the cross in ash on the forehead. It is a reminder of our humanity and mortality and the fact that we fall short of what God wants of us, but it also goes back to the scriptural idea of God creating Adam from matter by touch (Genesis 2.7). As Isaiah reminds us 'We are the clay, you are our potter, we are all the work of your hand' (Isaiah 64.8). In Lent this idea of our taking our being from God, being loved by God

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A cancer patient shares an affectionate moment with her husband



and given a purpose to accomplish as Christians before we die, is an important part of the Lenten journey and indeed our spiritual journey as a whole.

Activity

Find some plasticine or craft materials and use them to make a model or picture of a person in your family or a pet. Do this with children if possible. Concentrate on the way your fingers touch the materials and how you have to use touch to get the effects you want. What does it feel like to do this activity? What does it teach you about the experience of touch?

There are some people who cannot bear to be touched, perhaps because of abuse or a medical condition. How can we 'reach out' to such people in a way that does not make things worse?

GOING DEEPER

Thinking about being untouchable

A story

A woman with AIDS came into a hospital for a doctor's appointment. The illness had affected her brain so that she was unable to talk or write. A clerical worker sat down with her and tried to get her details for the hospital's record, but it wasn't possible. The sick woman took an orange out of her pocket and laboriously peeled it with shaking hands, then shared it with the clerical worker. They sat in the hospital waiting room and shared it together. Later, one of the other hospital workers told the clerical worker that she would not have touched the fruit, knowing that the woman had AIDS. A week later, the sick woman died of her disease.

We all have an idea of the kinds of thing we would not like to touch and sometimes these are sensible precautions, protecting us from danger or disease, but we can also have misconceptions about touch, thinking that we can be harmed where there is no risk at all. In the case of AIDS, people are often confused about what kind of contact with a person with HIV might put them at risk and agencies like the Terence Higgins Trust have gone to great pains to stress that the virus cannot be caught from sharing crockery or towels, kissing or swimming in the same pool.





Moreover, we most often than not do not stop to think what it is like to become 'untouchable' - to have people deliberately keep from touching you because they think you will give them a disease or harm them in some other way. Jesus was remarkable in that he touched all kinds of untouchable people in his ministry, not only healing them of their disease, but also making them touchable again, and so giving them back the opportunities we all need for love, care and intimacy.



Some questions to think about:

- Why did the sick woman share her food with the clerical worker?
- What kinds of thing (or person) would you find it difficult to touch and why?
- What kinds of touch would help you if you were ill? What kinds of touch might not?

MOVING ON

Engaging with scripture differently

This section is based on the Radio 4 programme's main reading for this Sunday.

Mark 14:43-50 (Judas kisses Jesus)

Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.' So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, 'Rabbi!' and kissed him. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to them, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.' All of them deserted him and fled.

Activity

Consider these stories:

During the Second World War, a Dutch Christian family were hiding their Jewish friends in their house. One day, another trusted friend came into the house and greeted all the Jews cordially, shaking the men's hands and kissing the children. Later the same day, the friend returned with the police, and the Jews and the Christians were all arrested.





In Germany during the Hitler era, two children kissed their parents before they went out to a youth meeting. When they returned they brought the authorities who arrested the parents. The children had denounced them.

A woman kissed her husband and children and went to work. Her office closed early that day and she came home unexpectedly. Looking through the kitchen window she saw her husband holding hands with and kissing her best friend.



Two boys were playing together and promised to be friends forever. To seal their pact they hugged and then swapped T shirts which they wore as often as they could to show their friendship. Later on they quarrelled and didn't see each other for a while. One of the boys got up one morning and found his T shirt torn and stuffed back through his letter box.

Question

What do you think it was like, for Jesus in the bible story, or for the families in the other stories to be touched and then betrayed?

MOVING INTO LENT

Touch sensations of the desert

As Jesus spent time in the desert, he must have been very aware of the texture and shape of his surroundings. The ground would be hard under his feet and the rocks and stones sharp and gritty to his fingers. Vegetation would be coarse and dry and he would feel the touch of both heat and cold and night and day came and went. Since he was fasting, the feel of water would be especially important, and he could not but have connected powerfully with God's creation and his own place as a human being. Perhaps he encountered the thorns that would later be his crown, the touch of dust and flies that he would be able to do nothing about at his crucifixion.

Some questions to think about:

- What do you think it was like for Jesus to be 'out of touch' with human beings?
- What touch experiences would he have noticed during his time in the desert and what might they have meant to him in his own ministry?
- Jesus was a carpenter, working with his hands, what might this have taught him about touch?
- What might Jesus have learned about the need for human touch and especially the needs of those who were untouchable?





RESTING ON THE WAY

Prayer and reflection

*Lord,
You knew the touch of love.
You knew the touch of friendship
You endured the kiss of betrayal
You endured the crown of thorns.*

*Help us to touch others with your love
Help us to touch others with your friendship
Help us to heal wounded hearts
Help us to heal the scars and hurts*

*For your name's sake
Amen*

We should think of God watching us moment by moment, mirroring back to us our human actions – our fears and our joys and our struggles – until he can at last reach out in the great gestures of the healing ministry and the cross. And at last we let ourselves be touched and changed.

Archbishop Rowan Williams, Christmas Message to the Anglican Communion 2004

Where else can this journey take me?

There is more material to explore in *Sense Making Faith* in the 'Journey into Touching' chapter and you can explore further journeys and ideas in the Explore section of www.spiritualjourneys.org.uk in the section called 'Touch'. This resource is also paired with another for Mothering Sunday, which you might also want to have a look at.

Have a look at:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/body/factfiles/touch/touch.shtml>

A Time to Heal: A contribution to the ministry of healing, Church House Publishing, 2000

The Daily Service on Radio 4 from March 23rd to 26th offers more readings and reflections for you to listen to about people whose spiritual journeys were changed by the experience of touch.

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