

THE MASTER'S TOUCH

LUKE 5:12-16

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

BY: RYAN DUECK

JULY 5, 2015/6TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

As we have already seen, today is a special day, as our friends from the L'Arche Lethbridge, who have been an important part of our community for a while now, have been leading us in worship.

It also marks the beginning of our summer worship series on following the *footsteps* of Jesus

We so often focus on the things that Jesus *says*; this summer we're going to pay attention to the things that Jesus *does*.

We're not going to *ignore* Jesus words, but we are going to give special priority to his *actions*—a different one each Sunday—and how these actions invite us into different ways of being in the world.

On one level, our short gospel story this morning is quite simple. A leper approaches Jesus in one of the small towns of the Galilee region. He begs Jesus for healing. Jesus heals him.

But, as is nearly always the case in the gospels, there are layers of symbolic significance behind not only *what* Jesus does but also *how* Jesus does it.

Leprosy was among the most feared diseases in the ancient world. Leprosy was and is a bacterial infection that results in damage to nerve endings. If untreated, it would lead to the lack of ability to feel pain in extremities, and thus the loss of these parts due to repeated injury.

Leprosy was also contagious. It was mainly transferred through a cough or contact with fluid from the nose of an infected person.

Unsurprisingly, in the ancient world before modern medicine, there was a great deal of fear attached to leprosy. Lepers were declared ritually unclean and banned from all

contact with others, banned from the temple and synagogues, shunned by family and friends.

(This is why Jesus instructs the leper and others he heals throughout the gospels to go and show themselves to the priests. The priest was the one who could declare someone “ritually clean” and allow them back in to the community. It’s also why the leper asked Jesus to be *made clean*. We might wonder why he didn’t say *healed*, but for the leper these were one and the same thing.)

So, to have leprosy was not only to have a very painful and debilitating disease, although it was certainly that; it was also to be declared ritually unclean and to experience profound social isolation.

It was to be completely ostracized and cut off from virtually all human contact.

So, with this in mind, let’s read verses 12-13 again.

When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.”

13 Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” And immediately the leprosy left him.

Jesus reached out his hand and *touched* the man. This is a powerful action.

Jesus didn’t *need* to do this.

Recall the story of the Roman centurion’s servant two chapters later in Luke 7 where Jesus heals by simply saying the word, without being anywhere near the servant.

So Jesus doesn’t *need* to touch this leper to make him well. He could just speak the word and it would be done.

But he does. Why?

Well, I think Jesus wanted people to see him touching an untouchable person, certainly, and to dispel some of the fear people had, to demonstrate that this man was a human being like everyone else.

But perhaps Jesus also simply knows the importance of physical touch.

N.T Wright makes these comments on this passage:

We know today, from studies of psychology, what powerful and long-lasting effects result from appropriate human contact. Parents and children, brothers and sisters, lovers and spouses, friends and neighbours—all in their different

ways will touch each other, in a hug, a handshake, an embrace, a kiss, a light touch on the arm. A good deal of human communication takes place, not in words, but in gestures like that. **To be cut off from all such contact is therefore almost as serious as losing one's sight or hearing.** So much sheer love is conveyed by touch.

Nobody had touched this man, we may suppose, for years. His body was now riddled with the disease; it had clearly been, quite literally, eating away at him for a long time. And now Jesus reached out and touched him.¹

Touch can sometimes mean all the difference in the world.

I saw this earlier this week.

From first century Galilee let's go to twenty-first century Las Vegas, NV!

Naomi and I were there earlier this week with her boss and our friend and his wife. While Naomi and her boss sat in the conference, his wife and I just wandered the streets of Vegas.

You see a lot of pretty outlandish and incredible things on Las Vegas Blvd. You also see some pretty ordinary and sad things. Things like homeless people pleading for money on the side of the street.

One person in particular caught my attention on Wednesday. It was a young woman tucked away in the shade, trying to get out of the 45-degree heat.

She had a sign that said, "Six months pregnant, no home, no family, no friends. Please help." We had walked by many people in desperate conditions, but when we passed this girl, my friend looked at me and said, "We need to go back."

My friend strode purposefully back to where the girl was sitting. She leaned over to her and began speaking to her softly, asking questions, smiling warmly, looking deep into this girl's eyes.

After a few minutes of conversation, I saw the girl nod enthusiastically, and then grab on to my friend's hand. They held hands for a few minutes, praying, crying, laughing, and praying some more.

After a few minutes, my friend walked down the street to grab some food for this girl. I tentatively sat down beside her. "Do you mind if I sit with you for a while?" I asked.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2001), 57.

“Sure,” she said, still wiping the tears from her eyes. I asked her what her name was. “Jamie,” she said. “Where are you from, Jamie?” I replied. “How did you end up in a place like this?” She smiled. “I’m from Utah. My parents live in Washington now, but they can’t help me. They can barely make rent. I followed a guy here from Utah, but he started beating me when I was three months pregnant, so I had to get away.”

I asked Jamie where she would sleep that night. She didn’t know—a shelter? Maybe?

I sat there with Jamie for a few minutes. The street looks so different from ground level. The people look so much bigger. I felt self-conscious and small. I wondered how it would feel, sitting down on the baking hot asphalt, while people just kept walking by...

I thought of this morning’s gospel story.

This girl probably hadn’t been touched in a good way in some time. She was used to people walking by. Maybe throwing some change at her. Maybe not. She was used to sitting on the side of Las Vegas Blvd and having people walk right on by.

But something changed when my friend took her hand. I quite literally watched her body relax. Her hands, which were clenched tightly, began to loosen. Her shoulders looked less tight. Her face opened up. She smiled.

Her body was quite obviously craving touch – something to say that she wasn’t dirty, she wasn’t unclean, she wasn’t some separate category of person that was unworthy of human contact.

Something that said that she was a human being.

My friend didn’t magically fix all of this girl’s problems. But she touched her.

And touch changes people, even if only a little.

The obvious question is who are our lepers today? Who are the people in our spheres who are in need of a touch, if not of divine healing, then of shared humanity?

I’m not going to provide a list.

But for starters, we might think of those people who:

- we are repulsed by
- we go to great lengths to avoid
- we consider inconvenient or socially useless
- we are afraid of
- we don’t understand

The leper in Luke 5 would have been each of these and many more. But Jesus reached out and *touched* him.

Jesus, in this simple action, reached across categories like “ritually unclean” and “contaminated” and “judged” and a whole host of other words that people associated with lepers.

He reached across these boundaries and said, simply, “I am willing. Be clean.”

The healing in this story is important, of course. Jesus restored this man, physically, mentally, relationally.

But before the healing, Jesus made sure that he touched this man, for all around to see. He didn’t just speak the words of healing. He insisted upon touching him.

In so doing, he shattered all the categories people had in their minds about this man with leprosy, and he communicated the simple truth that this person *mattered*, that he was a human being, that he was loved by God.

And we, who follow Jesus, must do the same.

I think that it is here that communities like L’Arche can be our teachers.

I have learned many things about Jesus from my limited interactions with the L’Arche Lethbridge community. But among the most important of these is the simple affirmation of the importance of touch.

It is very difficult to go to a L’Arche prayer night or some other event without being touched, whether it’s a hug or a handshake or an arm around the shoulder or whatever.

But even if you just sit back and observe, you will see touch all around you. An arm around someone as they help them eat. A guiding hand on the back as someone with a physical disability is helped to walk. A head on a shoulder. Hands held during prayer.

These and countless other forms of touch are physical expressions every day speak the simple truths:

You are loved. You matter. However differently we are abled, we are all God’s children.

Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, talks about touch in a little book called *The Scandal of Service*. In one passage he talks about a sabbatical spent in France where he lived with ten men and women with severe handicaps:

None of these people can speak and most cannot walk or eat by themselves. Each one has felt abandoned. What is important is to reveal to them their value and beauty, to help transform the negative image they have of themselves into a positive one and to communicate to them a desire to live. **This communication is essentially through touch.**²

L'Arche understands the importance of touch in communicating love and welcome and common humanity.

L'Arche understands the importance of touch in crossing boundaries—boundaries like:

- “disabled” and “abled”
- “weak” and “strong”
- “dependent” and “independent”
- “sick” and “healthy”

L'Arche teaches us that in the kingdom of God these categories are secondary to the single category of “child of God.”

May God help us to be people who, like Jesus, reach across boundaries of fear and discomfort.

May God help us to be the arms and hands and fingers and smiles and hugs of God, in a world where so many people are desperate to be touched.

Amen.



² Jean Vanier, *The Scandal of Service* (Ottawa, ON: Novalis, 1996), 37.