Sunday, February 17, 1985
JESUS TOUCHED HIM
Mark 1:40-45

Text: Mark 1:41 “Moved with compassion Jesus stretched out hand and touched him.”

Most of us have probably heard or seen the commercials from the telephone company which urge us to reach out and touch someone.” I like this commercial because it reminds me that there are people, I know who like to hear from me and I like to hear from them either by phone or letter.

We enjoy touching and being in touch with friends, family and others we have come to know. However, it´s a different story when we are asked to touch the untouchable. But that´s exactly what Jesus did in the story just read from the Gospel of Mark. “Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched him”.

Have you ever had the experience of being considered “UNTOUCHABLE” by those around you? Or by some other group of people? Some of us may have felt within ourselves that we were untouchable at one time or another, but it was probably more a feeling than a reality.

However, in Jesus´ time, and before and after for many years, to have been diagnosed as having the disease of leprosy meant banishment from society and being publicly declared as untouchable.

In Biblical times, both in the Old Testament era and in the New Testament, the term leprosy was used to describe a variety of skin diseases in fact, both to describe a variety of skin diseases in fact, both the original Hebrew and Greek words for leprosy mean an eruptive skin disease. Thus, what was called leprosy was not always the leprosy we know today. Sometimes what we now call psoriasis was thought to be a form of leprosy and also ringworm.

In Biblical times, the priests in the Jewish community were given the responsibility of pronouncing an individual as being leprous, or of giving a different diagnosis. In the book of Leviticus in the old Testament, there are detailed descriptions given of certain symptoms so as to guide the priest in his diagnosis.

If a given set of symptoms were present, the priest imposed a seven-day quarantine. At the of this period, the patient was examined again, and isolated for another week if no further degeneration was apparent after this second week, he or she could be declared clean.

If, on the other hand, certain other symptoms appeared, the priest was empowered to declare the patient “unclean” and the afflicted individual would be set apart from the rest of society. The leper was ordered to dress distinctively and to announce his or her uncleanness so people could get out of the way when the leper came down the street. The leper was now classified as being untouchable. Jewish also prescribed appropriate ritual ceremonies for those occasions on which spontaneous for those places and the leper was declared clean. This explains why Jeus told the man after he had been healed to go and show himself to the priest and to also go through the prescribed ceremonies to indicate his healing.

For hundreds and hundreds of years leprosy was considered a dread and mysterious disease. It wasn´t until 1871, that Gerhard Hendrik Hansen showed leprosy to be the result of infection by a bacillus somewhat similar to the organism that cause tuberculosis. Since then, leprosy is often therefore called “Hansen´s Disease.”

Today we know even a great deal more about leprosy than did Hansen, and so many of the fears of it have been lessened. Much off the pioneering work in understanding leprosy — its cause and its effects — are due to the work or Dr. Paul Brand and his wife. Margaret Brand. For many years there two carried on their work at the Medical College in Vellore, India. There they restored to thousands of lepers the use of their hands and arms and saved additional thousands from blindness.

As a side effect they also discovered what a helpful friend and messenger pain is to the human body. The more they immersed themselves in research, the more they learned, the greater was their awareness that most of the attitudes toward leprosy were outmoded to the point of being medieval and worse.

They discovered, for example, that most of the prevailing ideas about leprous tissue were mistaken. It had been believed that missing toes or fingers of lepers. Since they could feel no pain, they were not aware of it.

Gradually, as the result of research at Vellore and other Leper Centers throughout the world, the terrible superstitions about leprosy are, it is not highly contagious. In fact, it is virtually impossible to transmit leprosy to a healthy person. As with tuberculosis, of course, people in weakened conditions are vulnerable to varying degrees. The disease is not hereditary again, however, as with other diseases, increased susceptibility can be passed along from parent to child.

Basically, leprosy is the product of filth, poverty, and malnutrition. It can exist wherever unsanitary conditions, hunger, or poorly balanced diet exists. Maybe this is more than you wanted to know about leprosy. But it may help us understand why people in Jesus´ time, and before, feared it so much.

Now we know why it was such a significant act for Jesus to reach out and touch the untouchable — touch someone that everyone else was afraid to touch. In touching the untouchable, Jesus disregarded a taboo. And took a risk that no one else was willing to take.

It was the kind of action that Jesus repeated over and over again. He touched all kinds of untouchable people in so many ways. He ate with outcasts. He forgave a woman caught in adultery who was about to be stoned to death and saved her life. He talked with a Samaritan woman and helped her find new direction in her life when it was forbidden for a Jew to talk with a woman of Samaria.

Who are the untouchables in our time?
Individuals in prison or who have been in prison. Homosexuals. People of a different skin color than ours. People of different ethnic backgrounds. People of different social classes. Those who are mentally ill. Individuals who are physically handicapped. Persons who have cancer. People who are terminally ill. Research has shown that a person known to be dying may be ignored by hospital personnel. Even family and friends, when they see little hope for improvement, may withdraw from a dying person. The terminally ill often find themselves in a system of isolation, threatened as lepers were threatened many years ago.

We all have our categories of untouchables. But Jesus will have none of it. Moved with compassion, Jesus stretches out his hands and touches the untouchables. He accepts them. He loves them as God loves them and he asks us to do the same.

This matter of touching one another, however, can be very complicated even when one is not in the category of being untouchable.

For example, in some cultures, it is normal when two men greet each other to do more than touch by shaking hands-they embrace each other warmly and kiss each other. If we did that in our culture, it would probably be misinterpreted.

During the last presidential campaign, Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro had to be very careful how they touched each other lest it be misinterpreted.
Sometimes, we don´t want to be touched by anyone. Then at other times, another person holding our hand or putting his or her arms around us can be most reassuring.

When I had surgery a few years ago with a local anesthetic, one of my most comforting memories is that of a nurse gently holding my one hand between the who of hers during the surgery while at the same time softly telling me what was going on and that the surgery would soon be over. Her caring was communicated through her gentle touch and manner. I can still feel that warmth of her hands.

The fact is, whether we or someone else is touchable or untouchable, we all need to be natured and touched in many ways. And it can make all the difference in the world. The right kind of touch can perform miracles!

Some years ago, a researcher in special education noticed that children left alone in an orphanage for abandoned children got progressively more and more apathetic util they just ended up sitting. I.Q. wise they were normal children when they entered, but after about a year and half, their I.Q.´s dropped right down into the severely retarded range. The researcher wondered — what´s happening? So, he took twelve children — after much ado — because they didn´t want him to do it — and he left the rest of the children there. He took these twelve across town to a home for retarded adolescent girls and gave each one of these children to a little girl. These young women were no great shakes intellectually, but they really cared. The researcher gave one of these abandoned children to each of the young women who loved them to pieces and who cried when they put their little children on the bus ant the end of the day because they had to give them up. The only variable was the effect, nothing else was changed, just the fact that these children were taken and loved, played with and independently seen.

Later a paper was written on the project called “Head Start on Head Start.” in the paper the researcher does a follow-up study on these twelve children. Every one of the control groups left in the orphanage for abandoned children is in a psychotic state in an institution or severely mentally retarded in a state hospital. But in the groups that was cared for by the retarded young adolescent women, all but one graduated from high school, all of them are married, there is only one divorce, none of them is on welfare, everyone is self-supporting. The independent variable was that “somebody saw me, somebody touched me, somebody felt me, somebody carried about me!”

The right kind of touching can be done in many different ways — both to the untouchables and to the touchable.

Last Sunday afternoon, the 9th Grade Church membership class and the senior high Youth Fellowship had a speaker, and 87-year-old woman who lives here in Lincoln, and who has for years used her home as a place where the poor and the hungry can come for food and clothes with no questions asked. She´s been doing this for years, and believe me, she had done more touching of people´s lives and performed more miracles than anyone can imagine.

This woman has a sparkle about her and a twinkle in her eyes that is unforgettable. Because of her touching so many people live in this very practical way, she is a healthy person herself — that´s been her payback.

“Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.” Today we in the church are to be the hands of Jesus. We are called to touch both the touchable and the untouchable in whatever way that can be most beneficial to them. The touch can be with our hands, with our arms, with a phone call, letter, a gift or just a kind word. It´s something each one of us can do. Amen.