Sunday, February 13, 2000
TOUCHING THE UNTOUCHABLE
Mark 1:40-45

Touching someone you are familiar with, for example, touching a friend or relative when she has a fever, can be helpful and even healing. That was the theme of the sermon last week. Jesus took the hand of Simon's mother-in-law, who was ill with a fever, and lifted her up. Touching someone you've never met before, and who is considered by your religious tradition and society in general as being unclean and therefore untouchable, is another matter. This is sermon number two on how crucial human touch can be. This one, however, is about reaching out to those who are considered untouchable and what a difference that can make.

There are also some types of human touching that are in a completely different category. Sometimes we don't want to be touched by another person. We value our space, and we don't want someone to invade it without our permission. Even when given permission, some kinds of touching can be bad. Individuals who are very young and vulnerable should not be touched in certain places on their bodies for the wrong reasons.

And there's the issue of whether or not patrons who are watching exotic dancers should be allowed to touch the performers' bodies even with the dancer's permission. These categories of people touching one another need to be dealt with in another sermon. The sermon today is about human touch that is helpful, strengthens human relationships, and has within it the goal of healing rather than using another person for our own gratification.

Years ago, a major telephone company had as one of its advertising slogans, "Reach out and touch someone." I appreciated that theme because it reminded me that there are people I know who want to hear from me, and I want to hear from them, either by telephone or letter or now email. When that commercial was created, email was not the option it is now. There are so many ways we have of being in touch with people these days. It gets easier and easier to be in touch with friends, family, and others we have come to know and appreciate.

However, it's a different story when we are asked to reach out and touch the untouchable; to touch someone we have been taught from little on up to avoid. But that's exactly what Jesus did in today's story from the gospel of Mark. "A leper came to Jesus and said, 'Please heal me.' Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched him." What Mark doesn't tell us is that those who witnessed what Jesus did would have been shocked and horrified. No one in that day and time would touch a leper unless you were also a leper.

I would speculate that most of us have not had the experience of being considered untouchable by everyone around us. Some of us may have felt within ourselves that we were untouchable at one time or another because of some negative evaluation of our own self-worth.

I remember that as a teenager, I had one of the worst cases of acne on my face that you can imagine. Sometimes I could hardly stand to look at myself in the mirror. Then I would have the feeling that I was untouchable. Now when I look back on those times, I'm convinced that I looked worse to myself than I did to others. My friends at school did not consider me untouchable, nor did the members of my family.

In Jesus' time, and for many years before and after, to have been diagnosed as having the disease of leprosy meant banishment from society and being publicly declared as unclean and therefore untouchable. There was a logical reason for this. It was believed that leprosy could be spread through touching. Quarantines have been used throughout history for the purpose of limiting the spread of infectious diseases.

In those days, the term leprosy was used to describe a variety of skin diseases. Both the original Hebrew and Greek words for leprosy mean an eruptive skin disease. Because accurate diagnosis was not always possible, sometimes other skin diseases could have been described as leprosy.

In Biblical times, the priests in the Jewish community were given the responsibility of certifying that an individual had leprosy or giving a different diagnosis. In the book of Leviticus in the Old Testament, there are detailed descriptions given of various symptoms to guide the priests in their diagnosis. If certain symptoms were visible, the priest imposed a seven-day quarantine. At the end of this period, the individual 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, and the quarantine was lifted.

If, on the other hand, certain other symptoms appeared, the priest was empowered to declare the individual "unclean," and the afflicted individual would be separated 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 untouchable.

Jewish religious law also prescribed appropriate ritual ceremonies for those occasions on which the healing of a leper occurred so that he or she could be declared "clean." This is why Jesus told the man, after he had been healed, to go and show himself to the priests and to go through the prescribed ceremonies to certify his healing.

For hundreds of years, leprosy was considered a dread and mysterious disease. It wasn't until 1871 that Gerhard Henrik Hansen discovered leprosy to be the result of infection by a bacillus somewhat similar to the organism that causes tuberculosis. Since then, leprosy is often called "Hansen's Disease."

Today, medical science knows a great deal more about leprosy than did Hansen, and so many of the fears of it have been lessened. Much of the pioneering work in understanding leprosy — its cause and its effects — is due to the work of Dr. Paul Brand and his wife, Margaret. For many years, these 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 benefit, 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 unfounded.

They discovered, for example, that most of the prevailing ideas about leprous tissue were mistaken. It had been believed that missing toes or fingers or atrophy of the nose were directly caused by the disease. However, they discovered that leprosy was a disease that causes painlessness. Thus, lepers were losing some fingers and toes because they were insensitive to injury and were sometimes losing them at night while they slept because rats were eating

away at the toes and fingers of lepers in poorly constructed housing for lepers. Since they could feel no pain, the lepers were not aware of it.

Gradually, as the result of research at Vellore and other leper centers throughout the world, many of the false superstitions about the disease are receding. Contrary to popular impressions, 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 because of inadequate diet, lack of sanitary facilities, and other unhealthy environmental factors are vulnerable in varying degrees. The disease is not hereditary. However, as is the case with other diseases, it seems that increased susceptibility can be passed along from parent to child.

In summary, leprosy seems to thrive among people who live in filth, poverty, and malnutrition. Perhaps this is more than you wanted to know about leprosy. But I believe it can help us understand why people in Jesus' time and before and after 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 doing so, he disregarded a taboo and took a risk that no one else was willing to take. What's amazing to me is that in Mark's account, there is no hesitation, no questioning by Jesus of whether the man is worthy. He doesn't ask where he has his church membership or whether he prayed daily. He didn't ask to meet with his parents to discover whether he had been a good son. Whether or not the man deserved to be healed is not the question.

I believe the early church remembered this story because of its broader meaning. 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 sinners. He forgave a woman caught in adultery and who was about to be stoned to death. 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. He was willing to touch people who were considered untouchable, even though they were not a danger to society but who were outcasts for other social reasons.

Who are the untouchables in our time? For some, it is individuals who are in prison or who have been in prison. For others, it is homosexuals. For still others, the untouchables are people of a different skin color or even of a different ethnic background or even of a different social class. People who are mentally ill are untouchable for some. There are those who avoid individuals who have cancer or who are physically handicapped.

We all have our categories of those who are untouchable, people that we do our best to avoid, but Jesus would have none of it. Moved with compassion, he reached out with his hands to touch the untouchables, and in so doing let them know that God loved them in the same way as God loves all people. He included the excluded and, in so doing, gave them hope and healing. As his followers, we are to do the same.

But this matter of touching another human being can be 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 shake hands — they embrace each other warmly and kiss each other.

On the other hand, whether one is touchable or untouchable, we need to be nurtured and touched in many different ways with the right kind of touching.

Many years ago, a researcher in special education noticed that children left alone in an orphanage for abandoned children got progressively more and more apathetic as they were left alone because of a lack of staff. They were normal children in terms of IQ. But after about a year and a half, their IQs dropped dramatically. The researcher wondered — what's happening? So he took twelve of the children and placed them in another home during the day. It was a home for retarded adolescent girls and left the rest of the children in the orphanage.

The researcher assigned each one of the abandoned young girls to one of the retarded young women. It was as if each one now had an older sister who loved them and cared for them, which they truly did. Each evening, the orphans were returned to the orphanage. The only variable was that these twelve young children had a one-to-one caring relationship with another human being who was more mature.

Later, a paper was written on the project called "Head Start on Head Start." In the paper, the researcher outlined the follow-up study on these twelve children. Every one of the control group 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 group 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. Every one is self-supporting. The independent variable was that "somebody saw me, somebody touched me, someone cared about me."

"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, a letter, a gift, or a kind word. It's something each one of us can do. Amen.