Sunday, February 16, 2003
**UNTOUCHABLE**
Mark 1:40-45

Not too many years ago, there was a commercial which urged you to make long-distance telephone calls. The advertisement said, “REACH OUT AND TOUCH SOMEONE.” Even though this commercial was not talking about physically touching another person, I appreciated it because it reminded me that there were people I knew who might want to hear from me by telephone or letter.

I’m sure that all of you enjoy being in touch with friends, family members, and others you have come to know. As I mentioned in last week’s sermon, you also appreciate the value of human physical touch. That was one of the themes of last week’s sermon — Jesus took the hand of Peter’s mother-in-law and healed her.

Taking the hand of someone you love, or someone you know, is not that difficult. However, it’s a different story if you are asked to touch someone who is considered by you or your culture or religion to be unclean and therefore untouchable.

But that’s exactly what Jesus did in the story you heard earlier from the gospel of Mark.

Here’s what happened. A leper came to him and said, “If you choose, you can make me clean.” Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him. This statement is more revolutionary than you can imagine. Here’s why. When Jesus touched this man, who was considered to be physically unclean, in touching him, Jesus also became unclean.

This man was labeled unclean because he had leprosy. In the Hebrew culture of that day, the term “leprosy” was used to describe any kind of serious skin disorder, discoloration, or eruption. It may have included “Hansen’s Disease,” which is the official name for modern leprosy, but it could have been any other kind of skin problem which made the individual look ugly and different. In Israel’s purity code, described in the book of Leviticus, people with a disfiguring skin rash were called “unclean.” You were thereafter banished from the community. You had to wear torn clothing, let your hair grow long and hang loose so people could see you coming and avoid you lest you contaminate them. Whenever you approached another human being, you were supposed to cry out “unclean, unclean,” to warn them. You had to live outside the community in a cave or an empty tomb, which was appropriate because, in terms of the human social structure, your life was over. You were never touched by anyone again — not by your beloved, not by your wife or husband, not by your children or parents. The only exception was if your symptoms somehow disappeared, and then you were required to go to the priest to be certified as clean. With that certification, touching and being touched could resume.

The religious purity laws also prohibited your presence in the synagogue and even suggested that your disease was God’s punishment for your sins, which could make you feel even worse. These purity laws had some good in them. Little was then known about what skin conditions might be infectious and which were not. Thus, these rules kept some infections from spreading. In those days, the only way the world knew how to deal with infection was isolation, which was often harsh.

I grew up in a time when measles, chickenpox, smallpox, mumps, and whooping cough could earn you a visit from the public health department. Quarantine signs were sometimes placed on your home, announcing to the world that you had an infectious disease and were untouchable. So you might spend your days in bed reading comic books, with your mother treating you tenderly, serving you chicken soup and warm tea.

Parenthetically, this whole matter of human beings touching one another — when, where, how, and what parts of the body can be touched, and by whom — is a crucial issue today. Pedophiles are known for their inappropriate touching of young people. There are also times when, as an adult, you don't want to be touched by another person without your permission. You value your space and don't want someone to invade it without consent. Human touching can be very powerful and intimate.

There's also the issue today of whether patrons watching exotic dancers should be allowed to touch the performers' bodies even with the dancers' permission. Conversely, should the dancers be allowed to touch the patrons, and if so, should certain parts of the body be off-limits?

This whole matter of human touching can be complicated. Some teachers are afraid to give students a friendly hug for fear of it being misinterpreted, and some schools prohibit it altogether. In my ministry, I am much more cautious these days as to when I might hug or touch another person.

Recently, I read about a clinical pastoral education student who was getting training. On the elevator with him was a disturbed psychiatric patient. She looked distressed, and he thought it would be courteous and pastoral to be friendly toward her. She responded by saying, "Please don't try to cozy up to me. I'm too upset even to try to talk." He wanted to soothe her. Reaching out to touch her arm, he said, "I know, it's okay if you aren't up to conversation." She recoiled in anger. Later, she told the student's supervisor what had happened. She said, "Please tell your protégé that his touch isn't welcomed. He's a complete stranger to me, but he's acting like an old friend. He needs to learn not to do that. It hurts and it violates me."

The patient, whose name was Ann, had been physically and sexually abused by her father and older brother. She was slowly beginning to reconstruct these experiences and their impact when the student intruded on her personal space.

Years ago, a young man came to see me for pastoral and spiritual help. He said that he had multiple personality disorder caused a few years earlier by another counselor who had sexually abused him. As we talked, it was obvious that he had a number of mental problems beyond my capability. I listened and offered to help him find the professional psychiatric help he needed. As he was getting ready to leave my office, he asked, "Do you hug people? Will you give me a hug?" I was in a dilemma; if I hugged him, would he misinterpret it, even though he wanted the hug? In case you're wondering what I did, I gave him a hug as he left.

The tragedy for the desperate man who came to Jesus with his skin disease is that he may not have been very sick physically. He was so desperate that when he had the opportunity, he broke the rules, approached Jesus, and asked not only to be cured of his skin disease but to be made clean. What he desperately wanted and needed was to be restored to his family and his community. He wanted his life back.

Then comes that beautiful statement in the story: “Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.” Jesus broke the purity law in what he did. He deliberately took into himself the man’s condition, his isolation, his uncleanness. Jesus then announced to the man and to those who were watching, “You’re clean.”

John Dominic Crossan, a respected biblical scholar, said this about what Jesus did here: “That act deliberately impinges on the rights of society’s alternative boundary keeper in a way subversive to the established procedures of society.”

There are also biblical scholars who claim the phrase “moved with compassion” might be better translated as “moved with anger.” These scholars assert that Jesus was angry at religion when it isolates and excludes a precious child of God; angry at religion when it gets things backward, and instead of extending hospitality and welcoming all people — especially the outcasts, the segregated, and those considered untouchable and unclean — it concludes that its main function is to exclude and isolate categories of people.

I am convinced those kinds of attitudes and actions made Jesus angry. I think that’s why he acted so courageously. I believe that’s why he abrogated the boundary-making principle of institutional religion and said, in effect, “God’s boundaries are much broader, much more generous, much more hospitable, much more inclusive than yours.”

Jesus put this lonely, isolated man in a new place. It’s called “God’s realm,” where all are welcome, and where no one is a stranger, where boundaries are generous and broad and full of windows and doors. He welcomed people that religion and culture segregated and put on the outside, and invited them to come inside and find welcome, hospitality, restoration, and wholeness. That’s what his touch meant to the man who was considered unclean. It’s no accident that when Jesus called him “clean,” the man’s skin disease disappeared.

Paul Tillich put it this way: “Sometimes a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as if a voice were saying, ‘You are accepted.’ Sometimes it happens that we receive the power to say ‘yes’ to ourselves, that peace enters into us and makes us whole, that self-hate and self-contempt disappear, and that our self is united with itself.”

I believe the early church remembered this story because it reminded them of this broader meaning. It was the kind of boundary-breaking 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 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 reach out and touch people who were considered untouchable.

If you want to be a loyal follower today, you need to do what he did. You need to choose to touch the untouchables. That’s what his followers have continued to do down through the years. They have not been afraid to break boundaries that have excluded people. That’s what Rosa Parks did when she refused to give up her seat simply because she had the wrong skin color. That’s what many courageous people did in the midst of the civil rights era when they broke down the barriers that segregated people.

Stories like this one should also cause you to ask, who are the untouchables in today’s world? For some, it is individuals who are in prison or who have been in prison. For others, it can be homosexuals, transgendered people, or individuals of a different skin color or ethnic

background or social class. People who are mentally ill are untouchable for some. For others, it is people who have AIDS.

“Moved with compassion and also with anger, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.” Today, we in the church are to be the hands of Jesus. You are called to touch the untouchables in whatever ways that can be beneficial to them. The touch can be with your hands, with your arms, with your voice, with a smile, with a phone call, a letter, an email, a gift, or just a kind word. Reach out and touch someone. Amen.