Book 45

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

Simon's mother-in-law who was ill with a fever, lifted her up 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.

In Mark's gospel, the man is described as being 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 which is described in the book of Leviticus, people with a disfiguring skin rash were called "unclean." You were thereafter banished from the community. You also 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," in order 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

dead. You were not going to physically touch or be touched by anyone ever again—not your beloved, not your wife or husband, not your children or parents. The only exception would be that your symptoms would somehow disappear and then you were required to go to the priest to be certified as having been made 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 others 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 a form of quarantine.

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

Parenthetically, this whole matter of human beings touching one another, when and where and 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 you as an adult don't want to be touched by another person without your permission. You value your space and you don't want someone to invade it without your permission.

Even when given permission, inappropriate touching can take place. Human touching can be very powerful and very intimate.

There's also the issue today of whether or not patrons who are watching exotic dancers should be allowed to touch the performer's bodies even with the dancer's permission. Conversely, should the dancers be allowed to touch the patron's bodies even with their permission 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 these days I am much more cautious as to when I might hug or touch another person.

Recently I read about a clinical pastoral education student

who found himself on the elevator in the hospital where he 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 protege 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 in the

elevator. This whole matter of when to touch and when not to touch can be complicated.

Years ago, a young man came to see me for pastoral and spiritual help. He said that he had a multiple personality disorder which was 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 which were beyond my capability. I listened and offered to help him find the kind of 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 me to give him a hug? In case you're wondering what I did, I gave him a hug as he left.

The tragedy for this desperate man who came to Jesus with his skin disease is that he may not have been very sick

physically, yet the culture considered him dead.

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 the rights of society's

boundary keepers and controllers. Jesus acted as an alternative boundary keeper in a way subversive to the established procedures of society."

There are also Biblical scholars that claim the phrase, "moved with compassion," might be better translated, "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 it backwards and instead of extending hospitality and welcoming into the community all people, and especially the outcasts, the segregated and those considered untouchable and unclean, somehow concludes that its main function is to exclude and isolate categories of people.

I am convinced those kind 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 that touch of his 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 chose 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 which 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, or transgendered people. For still others the untouchables are people of a different skin color or even of a different ethnic background or social class. People who are mentally ill are untouchable for some. For others it is people who have AIDS.

We all have our categories of people who are untouchable, people we do our best to avoid.

"Moved with compassion and also with anger, Jesus stretched out his had 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.