Sunday, February 12, 2006
JESUS TOUCHED HIM
Mark 1:40-45

Touching another person can be healing or hurtful. You've heard someone say, "Don't touch me!" when a person is angry or simply wants to be left alone. There are times when you have not wanted to be physically touched by another person. You needed your personal space, and you didn't want someone to invade it without your permission. Even when given permission, some kinds of touching can be hurtful. Individuals who are very young and therefore vulnerable should not be touched in certain places on their bodies for the wrong reasons.

Human touch of another person can also be healing. A warm handshake, a pat on the back, a loving hug, a warm embrace, holding another person's hand in prayer, or therapeutic massage — all of these forms of human touch can be healing. Furthermore, touching another person in a healing way is not limited to physical touch. You can give a healing touch to someone with kind words that are spoken directly, on the telephone, in writing, or by giving a gift. Not too many years ago, there was a telephone company commercial that invited you to make long-distance calls with the slogan, "Reach Out and Touch Someone." It reminded you that there were people you knew who would be touched by hearing your voice on the phone. Today, with the internet and cell phones, there are so many ways you can touch someone in a positive manner.

Years ago, when this church was designing its television ministry, we did a lot of thinking before we decided to call our program, Reach Out and Live. What we wanted people to know was that we were reaching out to them and hoping to touch them with our words and music. By so doing, we were also inviting our viewers to reach out to others in whatever ways were appropriate. When you reach out to others, you find new life. You gain.

Frequently in the mail, we receive letters from someone who has seen our program that say, "That sermon truly touched me," or "The music deeply touched my spirit." You can also touch people in a healing way without being aware that you have done so. You may have said a kind word to another person and never knew how much it meant.

In the story heard today from the gospel of Mark, yet another kind of healing physical touch takes place. Jesus reached out and touched someone he had never met before, who was considered by his religious tradition and society, in general, to be unclean and therefore untouchable. In physically touching this man, Jesus violated a religious law and a public health rule. According to the story, a leper came to him begging and kneeling and said, "Make me clean." Note especially, he did not say, "Please touch me," or "heal me." The leper did not expect to be physically touched because he considered himself unclean and therefore untouchable. Yet Mark writes, "Jesus reached out his hand and touched him." The touch healed him because now he knew he was clean.

What Mark doesn't tell you is that those who witnessed what Jesus did would have been shocked and horrified. No one in that day would physically touch a leper unless they also happened to be a leper. Lepers were considered to be medically and spiritually unclean. They were outcasts.

I would guess that most of you have not had the experience of being considered unclean and therefore untouchable unless you had some infectious disease that put you in quarantine.

Some of you may have felt within yourself at one time or another that you were untouchable because of some problem. 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 other people considered me untouchable. Now, when I look back on those times, I'm convinced that I looked worse to myself than I did to others. Fortunately, my friends at school did not consider me untouchable, nor did members of my family.

"Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him." Today, it's difficult to comprehend how revolutionary that statement is. Yet that's why the early followers of Jesus remembered the story and why Mark wrote it down. Jesus broke a religious law. He disregarded a taboo and took a risk that no one else was willing to take. What a life-changing experience it was for that man, who was considered untouchable, to have been physically touched by Jesus.

What is amazing to me is that in Mark's account, there is no hesitation, no questioning by Jesus of whether the man is worthy to be made clean and healed. He was not afraid to touch him. He didn't ask where he held his church membership, whether he believed in God, or if he said daily prayers. He didn't ask to meet his parents to discover whether or not he had been a good son. He didn't tell the leper that he first had to repent of his sins and beg for God's mercy. Whether or not the man deserved to be touched and healed was not the question. Jesus reached out his hand and touched him.

By touching him, 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 whom religion and culture segregated and put on the outside. He invited them to come in and experience God's hospitality, restoration, and wholeness. That's what his touch meant to the leper who was considered unclean. That's why Jesus also told the man to go and show himself to the priest so that the religious authorities would know that he was no longer to be considered an outcast. He also told the man not to tell anyone about how he was healed or who made him clean. Why did Jesus do that? It's always puzzled me. But now I think I am beginning to understand. Jesus did not want to draw attention to himself. He wanted the healed leper to take some of the credit and be proud of his own part in it. After all, it was the leper who took the initiative to come to Jesus and asked to be made clean. Jesus was, in effect, saying to him, "Now be what you were meant to be."

Here's how Paul Tillich described the change in this leper: "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 so that self-hate and self-contempt disappear and that our self is united with itself."

I am convinced that another reason the early followers of Jesus remembered this story is 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 and outcasts. 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 Samaritan, and most especially with a Samaritan woman. He was willing to touch people who were considered untouchable, even those who were not considered a danger to society but who were outcasts for other social reasons or religious reasons.

Dominic Crossan, a respected Biblical scholar, said this about what Jesus did in this story: "This 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."

When you do this in any culture, you can make some of the boundary keepers very upset. In the 1950s, when I was organizing a new congregation in a south-side suburb of Chicago, some people in that community got very angry when black people bought homes in their previously all-white neighborhood. When some of our church members openly welcomed their new black neighbors, the boundary keepers really got mad and attempted to burn down their home.

Fortunately, some of the false boundaries human beings have established continue to be abolished. Here's an example that will be difficult for some of you to believe. In the early 1970s, when I had been the Senior Minister of this church for only a few years, some of our members got very angry with me because I baptized a baby in the church service that was the child of a mixed-race couple. I had violated, for a few people, a cultural boundary that had no basis for those who were trying to follow the way of Jesus. Fortunately, there were many more people who had no problem with what had taken place.

Today, I continue to be very proud of this congregation because you are not afraid to follow the example of Jesus by welcoming individuals who would not be welcome in some parts of our society and even some churches. You are touching people who, by some, are considered untouchable.

This issue is a continuing one for those who want to be followers of Jesus today. Who are the untouchables who are waiting to be healed by your touch? Who are today's "lepers?" Old lepers disappear, but new ones appear. For some people, untouchables are individuals who are in prison or who have been in prison. For others, it can be homosexuals or transgendered people. For still others, it continues to be people of a different skin color or even a different ethnic background or social class. People who are mentally ill are untouchable for some. For others, it is people who have AIDS.

If you want to be a true follower of the way of Jesus, 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 centuries. 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 on a bus 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 made some people untouchable.

I'm proud of the fact that the denominations that now make up the United Church of Christ were some of the first ones to organize academies and colleges for former slaves following the Civil War. In this way, they were touching the untouchables. These same denominations also were among the first to establish homes for the mentally ill and other outcasts. Again, it was another way of reaching out to touch the untouchables.

There are so many ways to touch people today and help in their healing. 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 I.Q., but after a year and a half, their I.Q.s dropped dramatically. The researcher wondered, What's happening? So he took 12 of the

children and placed them in another home during the day. It was a home for retarded adolescent women and left the rest of the children in the orphanage.

The researcher assigned each one of the girls from the orphanage to one of the retarded young women. It was as if each one now had an older sister who loved her and cared for her, which they truly did. Each evening the orphans were returned to the orphanage. The only variable was that these twelve 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 children. Every one of the control group, kept in the orphanage where there was not enough staff to individually care for the children, ended up in a psychotic state in an institution or in another institution for severely mentally ill patients. But in the group of twelve that had been cared for by the retarded adolescent women, all but one graduated from high school. All of them were married, and there had been only one divorce. Every one was also self-supporting. The independent variable was that “someone saw me, someone touched me in the right way, and someone cared about me.”

The Bible story says, “Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him.” Today, those who claim to be followers of Jesus are the hands of Jesus. You are called to touch both the touchable and the untouchable in whatever ways that can be most beneficial to them. Your touch can be with your hands, with your arms, with a phone call, an email, a gift, a smile, or a kind word. There are so many ways you can touch and heal people. In this way, you can reach out and live. Amen.