

“The Significance of Touch”
Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
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Touch is a sensitive subject in this day of the #MeToo Movement and rightly so. For far too long men in particular have gotten away with inappropriately touching others, mostly women, in ways ranging from harassment to assault. There never should have been any tolerance for such behavior and there certainly should not be now.

But touch is a sensitive subject for many people even without harassment or assault being involved. Some people, for various reasons which they may or may not fully understand, do not want to be hugged, especially by people they do not know well, while other people want to bond immediately with others and think everyone should welcome their hugs, and the combination of these realities creates tension.

It’s why author Robert Fulghum used to term “the great hugging plague” to refer to the meet-and-greet times some churches have in worship, the passing of the peace. A colleague of mine in another setting once said that every time he visited a church that employed this practice, he ended up in the scratch and dent section. Before I could reply, he added, “Yes, I know, where else would I belong?” Where else would any of us belong? We are all scratch and dent in the church, in life, no matter how well we may try to cover it up.

But you get the point, touch can be a sensitive subject. There are many people who do not welcome certain physical expressions of concern while there are others who seem oblivious to the signals these folks send. In fact, we can all miss such signals or fail to read them correctly. The author of Ecclesiastes says there is a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing (3:5). Indeed, there is.

But all of this having been said, touch is vital to human experience. Human beings who live in isolation and thus are not touched at all experience all sorts of debilitating effects. Older people who live in care facilities often suffer for a lack of touch because they are perceived to be

less attractive and thus, sometimes the greatest act of care, after simply showing up, is to affirm such people through physical contact, a gentle touch on the shoulder, a handshake that is more than perfunctory.

We should, of course, always be sensitive to what other people want and need and then honor their wishes. There are obvious lines that ought not be crossed and, in general, we should not assume a level of intimacy with touch that does not exist in other ways. But we all need human warmth, connection, touch, offered in appropriate ways.

It is interesting to note that the central rituals of our faith recognize the significance of touch. When we dedicate children, we don't just say a prayer for them while keeping a safe distance, even though children can be little petri dishes growing infection, and spit-up devices, dangerous in many ways. We take them into our arms and bless them. When we baptize, we physically take people under water and bring them back up. When we ordain, as we will today, we not only offer a verbal word of blessing, we affirm and bless the ordinands with physical touch, placing our hands on their heads or shoulders. When we celebrate communion, we may or may not directly touch each other, but we touch the trays and elements which connect us to God and each other.

In every ritual, touch plays a central role, and if we think about it, it just makes sense, not just because we need touch, but because this is how God relates to us. God does not relate to us solely as a Distant Other to be pondered. God knows us intimately and calls us by name. God comes to us in the form of a real, flesh-and-blood human being. God relates to us in deeply personal ways. Thus, as we seek to relate to God and reflect the love we have known in Christ for one another, we do so in deeply personal ways, intimate ways, including physical touch.

Consider the texts we have read today. In the reading from Isaiah, God expresses a deep and personal knowledge of Israel which leads to care and protection. "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;" God says, "I have called you by name, you are mine." There is no physical touch, but God's involvement is deeply personal, God's presence is palpable.

In the reading from Acts, Peter and John go to Samaria to attend to the needs of some new believers. They have accepted the Good News

about Jesus and been baptized, but they have not received the Holy Spirit. There is no formula for when and how the Spirit comes in the book of Acts, or perhaps better understood, for when and how people awaken to the presence of the Spirit, but no matter how we understand this reality, these Samaritan believers have not experienced it.

And I should add - yes, those Samaritans, outsiders, the enemy! But Peter and John go anyway, they lay their hands on these Samaritans, an amazing affirmation in and of itself, and as they do, they receive the Holy Spirit. It is not a magical power the Apostles possess. Right after our reading ends, a local magician named Simon offers Peter and John money in exchange for the knowledge of how to impart the Spirit and they tell him the Spirit isn't a commodity to be sold! And to be clear, we do not bestow the Spirit upon those we ordain today, though we ask the full blessing of God, nor is there any exchange of money. But physical touch is involved as in Peter and John's ministry in Samaria.

It is also involved in Jesus' baptism described briefly by Luke. All four Gospel writers tell this story with a tone that is apologetic. It is unusual for a Messiah to be on the receiving end of spiritual direction – John baptizes Jesus - this is one reason almost all scholars believe this to be an authentic event. No Gospel writer would have invented it.

But we get just the basic details. When others had been baptized, Jesus was baptized and as he was praying, the Spirit descended upon him like a dove, as a voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." There were verbal words of blessing, as with our practice of ordination, but John had to touch Jesus to baptize him and Luke even says the Spirit descended "in bodily form" like a dove. So, this is a physical experience, touch is involved and it conveys a deep sense of blessing, which apparently even Jesus needs.

All of this seems significant as we approach the ritual of ordination, as we think about deacon ministry and as we ponder the character of the church. In regard to ordination, some things can vary such as what people say to and pray for the ordinands, and whether they sit or kneel. Most prayers are brief, and need to be since we invite all to participate, while others are not. And we used to kneel, though with my

knees, I wish I could have been seated. But what does not vary is that physical touch is involved. There is a reason it is called “the laying on of hands.” It’s a key part of how we convey a sense of blessing.

And since this is the case, and since we all need human touch, it is worth pondering the place of touch in deacon ministry. Sensitivity is required and each deacon must honor his/her personality. There is no one way to do anything, including congregational care. But as we visit the homebound and families with newborns, as we care for the sick and grieving, as we nurture new people into the church and Christian faith, we might look for personal ways, carefully chosen, to express love.

Last but not least, as we are thinking about the significance of touch, we might ponder its place in church life as a whole. We should do everything we can to make sure there is no inappropriate touching. Church ought to be a place of refuge for the vulnerable, a place where everyone feels safe, and this is not the case when there is inappropriate touching. But once care is taken, we should look for opportunities to create space for the kind of touch that is healing. Church ought to be a place where we can *feel* loved and affirmed. And as Peter and John’s willingness to touch Samaritans conveyed a sense of affirmation, who we are willing to touch speaks volumes as to how we feel about others.

The question is – how do we make sure our touch is the right kind? A part of me wants to say – we just know. But this isn’t always the case. I once told a seminary student to place a poster over his desk which would say, “Don’t Be an Idiot!” because of something his professor did. But he said to me, “How will I know?” Sometimes we don’t know.

I remember reading a children’s book about hugging, what was appropriate and what was not. We need something like that on an adult level, and if there is any doubt, we should probably refrain from embracing, but we also need to find ways to express our love.

We can all think of times when we felt deeply affirmed, perhaps it was with words... perhaps it was with a genuine handshake or warm embrace... perhaps it was a ritual like ordination... There is no better feeling than to be touched in our hearts and souls with love. That is what we are about today and always in the church.