**TOUCHED**

1ST Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

June 28, 2015

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27 or Lamentations 3:22-33 or

Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15; 2:23-24

Psalm 130 or Psalm 30

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Mark 5:21-43

O

ne news story that caught my eye this week came out of South Africa. It will probably be of minor interest to some of you who were in worship last Sunday. The story details the death of a 12-foot-long African Rock Python. The engorged snake was first spotted by a mountain biker in the Lake Eland Game Reserve, about 100 miles south of Durban two weeks ago. The snake was motionless and people were speculating on what the snake had consumed. Some thought it might have been a small warthog and others an impala calf. But it was concluded that the snake was harmlessly dead. Park rangers did an autopsy and inside the snake’s stomach they found a 30-pound porcupine.



Last Sunday we quoted nineteenth century, philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer who compared the human race to porcupines huddled together on a bitter cold winter night. The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth; but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills. We then thought about the implications of porcupines hugging one another.

So this Sunday, let us consider a scene with Evangelist Jesse Duplantis who had an “up-close and personal” experience with the urgent needs of one of his listeners. He was leaving a worship service when an elderly woman grabbed him by the shoulders and threw him into a nearby coat closet! Her intent wasn’t to hurt him, she just wanted his full attention. Once she had him cornered in the closet, she got down to business.

“I want a man!” she announced. Well, you can only imagine the fear that rushed to the mind of Rev. Duplantis at that instant. “I want a man!” she said with intensity a second time. “You're a man of God, and you know how to pray. Pray for me!"

Relieved, Duplantis blurted out a quick prayer for the woman. The satisfied woman opened the closet door and released her “hostage.”

About a year later, Rev. Duplantis had reason to return to this particular congregation and he encountered this woman who was accompanied as she clung to the arm of her handsome new husband.

After the service, Rev. Duplantis spoke to her and described the terror that had gripped him in the coat closet a year earlier. She informed him that she had only been obeying scripture that had been read that day in worship. “And what scripture would that be?” asked Duplantis. She quoted a snippet of Matthew 11:12: “The violent take it by force."

*Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.* *From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.*

Naturally, she had taken this Bible verse completely out of context. Still she believed this new husband was an answer to that forced prayer in the closet. Duplantis could argue with her theology, but he couldn’t argue with her results.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I believe Jesus would have appreciated this lady. Think how often he praised people who would not be denied. On one occasion he said, “Seek and ye shall find, ask and it shall be given to you, knock and the door will be open.” (Luke 11:9) And he responded to people who were not hesitant about seeking, asking, knocking.

Take this good man in our scripture lesson, or the woman who appears in the text after him. Jairus was a leader of the local synagogue. When he saw Jesus, he fell at the Masters’ feet and begged him repeatedly, *"My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live."* (NRSV)

I am certain there were other leaders of synagogues who also had needs, but I doubt they would have humbled themselves and fallen at the feet of this itinerant teacher like Jairus. They would have been too proud. It’s not necessarily that they felt too good to bow at another’s feet. They just wouldn’t want to look silly doing it--particularly with other people around.

This is why many of us men won’t ask for directions--even when hopelessly loss. Pride. This is why many of us won’t ask the mechanic exactly what he’s doing to our car. We don’t want to appear stupid. We would rather pay too much than ask questions. It is amazing what you can accomplish by simply asking.

You go to buy a toaster and it comes with a free bank. Will Rodgers put it, “If stupidity got us into this mess, then why can’t it get us out?” It is one thing for a laundry to call and tell you, “We’re sorry, but we’ve lost your shirt.” But, you don’t expect your broker to phone and give you the same message.

This is a really lousy time for the lectionary to pop up lessons like these today. Sometimes I choose scriptures to be read on Sundays because I’ve been concentrating some personal Biblical study in some area – like the life of Abraham or Mountain Top experiences. During those we look at what happened on the tops of mountains in the Bible. We’ve had a series of messages on the “I Am” sayings in the gospel of John. So, one Sunday it is “I am the Way,” and the next it is “I am the Good Shepherd,” and on Easter it might be “I am the resurrection and the life.”

But, then sometimes, we just open up the common lectionary and let the standard Bible readings for the day be chosen by an ancient committee. This is the case with this morning. And voila! There comes this Stewardship passage from the pen of Paul and a stories about a healings by Jesus.

What Paul has to say may be the most uncomfortable! I am aware and you are too, that millions of people in the world today would be thrilled to have the problems we have. Most of us have access to good health care, are blessed by people who love us, and we tend to be able to forage for food in the forests of fine grocery stores and a magnificent public market. We have the freedom to worship the resurrected Christ.

So, even though it may not be the best time for these texts to emerge with messages about healing and giving, something that seems to be more suited to the month of October or November, especially for Paul’s little letter.

I’m sure that I have told you what the pastor in a small country church did when the congregation was having some financial struggles. One Sunday he announced, “Now, before we pass the offering plate, I would like to request that the person who stole the chickens from Brother Martin’s henhouse please refrain from giving any money to the Lord. The Lord doesn’t need money from a thief!”

The ushers received the offering and it seemed that everyone in the congregation put something extra into it that day.

Some of you have listened to Paul Harvey. Several years ago, about Thanksgiving time, he told a true story about a couple who had a left over, mentality rather than an “abundance” mentality. The way Mr. Harvey relayed the tale needed the back-up information that each year the Butterball Turkey Company sets up a hotline to answer consumer questions about preparing Thanksgiving turkeys.

One woman called to inquire about cooking a turkey that had been in her freezer for twenty‑three years! Yes, that’s right. Twenty-three years! The operator told her it might still be safe to serve the turkey if the freezer had been kept below 0 degrees the entire time. But the operator warned the woman that, even if it were safe, the flavor had probably deteriorated, and she wouldn’t recommend eating it.

The caller replied, “That’s what we thought.” Then she added these words, “We’ll just give it to the church.” It kind of makes you cry, doesn’t it? It is a story that makes your skin itch. But that is just one of the things that the skin does. Did you know that your skin is the largest organ of your body? It is also the oldest, the first one developed in the womb. It is sensitive, that is why it itches.

Its function is more complex than being just the "wrapper" that holds you together. It sends physical messages of heat and cold, pain and pleasure, and psychological messages of love and friendship, of faith and hope.

The skin has some 50 receptors per 100 square millimeters. Within these receptors are tactile points (from 7 to 135 per square centimeter). On the back of your hand you have very few of these tactile points; in the palm of your hand you have many more; and on the tips of your fingers (where you can really feel things), you have the most. From all of these tactile points you have about a half a million sensory fibers that carry messages to the spinal cord by the posterior roots and on up to the brain.

Continual breakthroughs in information about the skin have happened since serious study began in the 1940's, but only recently has it been uncovered that the skin can tell us about our moral well-being. - Moral in the sense of your morale. Contact with others - or the lack of it - mysteriously affects us. Contact can destroy or heal. The gospel lesson on the other hand has a woman healed and a little girl raised to life through the touch of Jesus.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Without anticipating anything unusual I consulted a large dictionary and looked up the word *touch.* There was a most extensive listing under the word - fourteen full columns. The sheer enormity of the definitions stood in testimony to the influence which the tactile experience of hand and fingers has had upon our imagery and our speech.

God touched the world through the incarnation - the embodiment in skin of the Christ. Jesus, in turn, touched humanity - laying his hands on those in need in order to heal, to give life, and to comfort. So strong was this power of contact that he even knew when power left his body for another when the woman in the Gospel merely touched the hem of his garment.

Back in 1972 anyone who worked with youth picked up a copy of a book entitled *Values Clarification* by Sidney Simon, Leland Howe, and Howard Kirschenbaum. It was a handbook of strategies for teachers and students to explore moral behavior by examining their values. The book contains a series of exercises that helps you clarify your values, and what was published for use in the public school was soon adapted and improved for use in church settings.

A little later, Sidney Simon, professor of education at the University of Massachusetts published another book entitled, *Caring, Feeling, Touching.* In it he writes,

There is a deep seated hunger within us that no amount of food can satisfy. It is hunger for the touch, the feel, the concrete reality of human contact. Quite literally, it is "skin hunger."

In a class I teach at the University of Massachusetts, I emphasize these premises:

1. Every human being comes into the world needing to be touched, a need that persists until death.

2. Being touched in tender, caring ways can be healing, therapeutic.

3. In many homes children are fortunate enough to have their skin hunger satisfied; in many others, touching takes only the form of spanking. (Some of us believe there are children who deliberately misbehave just to establish even this painful skin contact.)

It is not hard to tell the difference between types of homes. Young people whose skin-hunger needs are satisfied tend to be open, warm and relaxed. Those who have been rarely touched at home often seem to be more withdrawn, prone to living in a fantasy world, even hostile. I am convinced they have a diminished sense of their own worth.[[3]](#footnote-3)1

I know you are wondering . . . so is this where we have the subject of hugging porcupines reintroduced. Well, it could be.

Have you ever thought about what you have touched? What your hands have squeezed. In the comic strip, "Peanuts" Linus is eating a sandwich and makes this observation: "Hands are fascinating things. I like my hands! I think I have nice hands! My hands seem to have a lot of character. These are hands which may someday accomplish great things.....These are hands which may someday do marvelous works. They may build mighty bridges or heal the sick, or hit homeruns, or write soul-stirring novels! These are hands which may someday change the course of human destiny!

Then Lucy, looks at these marvelous hands of Linus and offers this observation, "They've got jelly on them."

I took out my hands for a while this week and wondered what they had touched - money, computer keyboard, buttons, baseball, Sophie – the poodle next door and Budge, the Airedale down the street, some doorbells, the button on the microwave and the TV. I thought about who they had touched, - a newly minted baby in the narthex, people floating into the office, some in the hospital, those who grieved, some not just touched, but hugged, risking it all from a person who does not touch others easily or naturally. These hands had shaken hands with some men that I didn’t know and because of their background, had even thought to distrust. Then I raised the question, “What had these hands healed?”

That movement of human development which some of us called "the touchy - feely" movement has long waned. There were whole weekends where people would go away to be verbally abused and attacked, and later stroked, walking through fields holding hands as a group, picking each other up, developing trust. I suppose that I was taken a little back by it all because I came from a loving home, but one in which there wasn't a great deal of demonstrative touching.

I can remember people from my childhood, like Winnie Jones, bless her soul. Winne loved to sing and at one time had a beautiful contralto voice. Winnie was a big woman who taught Sunday School with gusto and those young bucks who sat it the back of the class used to take guesses on her size. Winnie hugged and kissed everybody and would embarrass her husband, Wilbur in front of all by enveloping him with those hefty ham-hock arms of hers, grabbing him, lifting him off the floor about three feet until he started to turn blue. Sometimes, I would by-pass Winnie just so I wouldn't have to be lost in the folds of her print dress with one of those, "How are 'ya darlin" hugs of hers.

 But, Winnie blessed so many folks, hugged those who never were hugged or touched by anybody else.

Much of the success or failure of Christianity depends upon touch. It is like ringing a doorbell. Only one thing is required - that the bell button be sufficiently touched to cause two pieces of wire or metal to contact one another. When contact is made, the bell rings. We can admire the bell, listen for thee bell, paint the bell, polish the bell, but until someone touches it properly, nothing happens.

A prominent man named Jairus had a young daughter who was expected to die. He had tried everything and finally decided to ask Jesus to help. The man was so desperate that he humbled himself before Our Lord. He placed his full trust in Him. Christ was impressed and agreed to cure her.

As they made their way through the narrow streets, Jesus was recognized. Everybody wanted a close look at Him. At this moment an unseen drama was being enacted. A poor woman with hideous hemorrhages was making her way through the throng in an effort to contact Jesus. She had been afflicted for ten years and although she had spent her entire savings on physicians the disease had steadily regressed. According to Mosaic Law, she was unclean and had no right to be out in public, for according to the law, anyone she touched or who touched her would become unclean, too, ceremonially unclean to go to the Temple.[[4]](#footnote-4)2 But of one thing she was sure, that contact with Christ would heal her. Near death, bent over and covered, she crawled through the legs of the crowd, determined to at least reach out and grasp the hem of Jesus' robe.

Our Lord whirled around with wide-eyed surprise and crisply inquired, "Who touched me? Which of you? I must know." Peter came up with a quick and sensible answer, "Why Master, look at the crowd, all kinds of people have touched you. They are touching you right now." Christ replied something like this, "These people are touching me with curiosity. They have touched me as a celebrity like people might want to touch Michael Jackson. But someone touched me with faith. There is a vast difference. I could tell in an instant because power, virtue, flowed directly from me to whoever that person was who touched me."

The woman wanted to cause no trouble. She wanted no notice. She would have shunned any possible publicity. She was trying to leave, undetected. But the Master's question was a command. She turned back to Him, falling at His feet, admitting that it was she who had made the contact. His face was radiant with delight as he leaned down, tenderly and gently helped her to her feet saying, "O woman, great is your faith. Do you realize that it was your own faith that cured you? It was your inner and unwavering conviction that drew the power from me into yourself. Go in peace. You are healed.

The two forces that must touch each other are the Christ in Jesus and the Faith in human flesh. When they meet, anything can happen.[[5]](#footnote-5)3 This woman, in her special way had touched and worshipped that which was holy. From Jesus power had been given out. And we might think that when power is given out, we who have been recipients of divine love might be eager to give up some portion of our blessing as an expression of gratitude.

Sometimes we are also touched by words and the actions of others. This kind of touch is not skin to skin, but it can be from heart to heart. As we stare toward the celebration of the 4th of July this week, I thought that it might be good to think of ways we have been touched heart to heart.

Surely President Obama touched more people this week when he spontaneously began to sing Amazing Grace at the funeral of Pastor Clementa Pinckney in Charleston. May you are aware that many cultures use the Pentatonic Scale.  On a piano, you can find the Pentatonic Scale merely by playing the “black” keys.  There are Celtic tunes that have their melodies rooted in the Pentatonic Scale, but it is the scale for many African songs.  Using this scale you may discover a vast number of Negro Spirituals that can be sung with it including songs like *Every Time I Feel the Spirit, Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* or *Amazing Grace*.

John Newton wrote the words to this great hymn.  He was once the captain of an English slave ship.  Although Newton participated in the slave trade for a number of years, he later became a prominent supporter of abolitionism.  Joining with others like William Wilberforce he lived to see the Slave Trade Act of 1807 which abolished slavery in England.

Interesting details about Newton’s own period of servitude, his rescues from West Africa and later from a storm off the Irish coast form the backdrop of profound changes in his life.  This last event, which involved cargo plugging a leak in a ship’s hull led to his conversion to Christianity and on March 10, 1748, a date he determined as significant, he embraced evangelical Christian faith.  He studied Greek, Hebrew and Syriac and on June 17, 1764 was ordained a priest in the Church of England.

He wrote the words to *Amazing Grace* and some believe that they were set to an English or Celtic folk tune.  Others think that the tune we have come to know and which President Obama sang were first heard from the bowels of an English slave trading ship.  The truth of this is uncertain, but what seems to be clear is that the hymn has been shrouded with connections to redemption, the black keys of the Pentatonic Scale, emancipation from many forms of enslavement and freedom.  How wonderful that the notes and words that embody confession and hope for so many would have spontaneously brought that grieving congregation to a chorus of praise.

Gov. Mike Huckabee [remember him?] tells a wonderful story about Martha Cothren, a social studies school teacher at Robinson High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Back in September of 2005, on the first day of school, Ms. Cothren did something not to be forgotten.

With permission of the school superintendent, the principal and the building supervisor, she took all of the desks out of her classroom.

The kids came into first period and there were no desks. They looked around and said, “Ms. Cothren, where’re our desks?”

And she said, “You can’t have a desk until you tell me how you earn them.”

They responded, “Well, maybe it’s our grades.”

“No,” she said.

Then they suggested, “Maybe it’s our behavior.”

And she told them, “No, it’s not even your behavior.”

And so they came and went in the first period, still no desks in the classroom. Second period, same thing, and third period too. By early afternoon television news crews had gathered in Ms. Cothren’s class to find out about this crazy teacher who had taken all the desks out of the classroom.

The last period of the day, Martha Cothren gathered her class. They were at this time sitting on the floor around the sides of the room. And she says, “Now I’m going to tell you.”

Martha Cothren went over to the door of her classroom and opened it, and as she did 27 military veterans, wearing their uniforms, walked into that classroom, each one carrying a school desk. And they placed those school desks in rows and then they stood along the wall. And by the time they had finished placing those desks, those kids, for the first time I think perhaps in their lives, understood how they earned those desks.

Ms Cothren said, “You don’t have to earn those desks. These guys did it for you. They put them out there for you, but it’s up to you to sit here responsibly to learn, to be good students and good citizens, because they paid a price for you to have that desk, and don’t ever forget it.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Throughout history there have been people who have given their all, including their very lives that the Gospel might be preached in this place. Some of us want a free ride on their devotion, and friends that just won’t do. And so, St. Paul calls us to excel in our giving. He reminds us of what others have given in our behalf.

Then Paul adds the ultimate comparison. He reminds us of what Christ gave in our behalf. He writes, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich . . .”

Christ has made us rich. He’s given us the great gift of life eternal. But he paid an awful price in order for us to be granted the offer. This is the message of the cross, and when it comes right down to it, this is the most important motivation for giving. It isn’t how you feel about the pastor or the Session or the economy or even about how life is treating you. Paul says we give and share because God first gave to us.

Some of you will remember from your school days the Frenchman the Marquis de Lafayette. Lafayette was an extremely rich French general and politician. He was sympathetic to the cause of the American colonists and assisted George Washington in the American Revolution. Then he returned to France and resumed his life as the master of several estates.

In 1783, the harvest in France was a poor one, but the workers of Lafayette’s farms still somehow managed to fill his barns with wheat. “The bad harvest has raised the price of wheat,” said one of his workers. “This is the time to sell.”

Lafayette thought about all the hungry peasants in the surrounding villages. Then he said, “No. This is the time to give.”[[7]](#footnote-7) And that is what he did. He shared his wheat with those who had none.

Lafayette understood excellence in giving. He was undoubtedly conscious of all that had been given to him and he opened his hands and heart to others.

There are some who will look at the uncertain times we live in and say, “This is a time to look out for myself.” Other will look at these uncertain times and, like Lafayette, will say, “No. This is the time to give.” Guess which of these has the heart of Jesus?

You know the needs that surround us in our community and you know how important your faith in Jesus Christ is to you and how grateful you are for your salvation. That is all that matters when it comes to giving. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich . . .”

In response to such love, how can you not excel in your giving? For your giving is one way that you can touch others with healing hope. We can give our touch and care that will heal souls and we can give our resources to provide for similar healing.

1. Jesse Duplantis, *Jambalaya for the Soul* (Tulsa, OK: Harrison House, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The sermon entitled, *Touché* was preached on June 26, 1988 at Central Presbyterian Church, Downingtown, PA by b. g. Boak. The sermon also looked at Mark 5:21-43 and used this illustration of skin as the largest organ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 1 Sidney B. Simon*. Caring, Feeling, Touching*. Argus Books. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 2 Leviticus 15:25, 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 3 "The Faith That Words" - sermon by The Rt. Rev. Austin Pardue (Episcopal). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.beliefnet.com/newsletter/step1.aspx. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dr. Daniel Lioy, *International Bible Lesson Commentary* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008), p. 381. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)