

The Power Of Touch by Jeff Strite

Mark 1:40-1:45

We're going to begin today's sermon with a trivia question:

Question: What is the largest organ of your body?

(Answer: the skin)

If you an average adult, your skin covers about 21 square feet of your body. It will weigh 9 pounds and contain more than 11 miles of blood vessels.

If you think you look bad in the mirror with no clothes on... imagine how bad you'd look without any skin. Your skin holds your body together, and protects you from various dangerous bacteria and viruses.

In hot weather, your skin will release as much as 3 gallons of sweat a day. However, your eardrums, the area around your lips and your nail beds will not sweat.

Most people think that the only reason we have fingerprints is so the police can find us if we've been bad, but God designed them so that you'd have the ability to grip items in your hands. Unborn children don't develop fingerprints until after 3 months in the womb, and some people never develop fingerprints at all. There are 2 rare genetic defects that deprive some people from having them.

And you really need to clean up after yourselves. Your skin sheds 50,000 cells every minute. Globally, dead skin accounts for about a billion tons of dust in the atmosphere.

Your skin is a very special creation by God. And one of the primary functions of your skin is to help you "feel" the world around you. There are at least 5 different types of receptors in the skin that help us to respond to pain and to touch. And in blind people, the brain becomes rewired so they can respond to stimulus received through touch and hearing. Thus, the blind literally "see" the world thru touch and sound.

The ability to touch and "feel" the world around us is critical to us.

ILLUS: Back in the 1940s someone conducted a study of 26 children in an orphanage. The babies were more or less cut off from human contact in their cribs, or where a single nurse had to care for seven children. By the time the babies were 1 year old, the isolated orphanage babies were less curious, less playful, and more subject to

infections.

When they reached their 2nd and 3rd year of life, of the 26 children reared in the orphanage, only 2 could walk and manage a few words.

(http://thebrain.mcgill.ca/flash/capsules/histoire_bleu06.html)

ILLUS: At first service, Doug (a former fire fighter) told me about the experience he often had at the scenes of house fires. There were times when they'd arrive on the scene to find people in serious shape and often in shock. But what they discovered was that if they quietly sat beside the victim and gently touched them as they spoke to them, the victim would suddenly calm down and be comforted by that simple touch.

The ability to be touched can make all the difference in our lives.

And that truth makes the story we've just read this morning all the more powerful.

This is one of the first recorded healings that Jesus seems to have performed.

And who does He heal?

A Leper!

That's interesting, because Lepers were considered "untouchable."

Leprosy is a terrible disease.

ILLUS: If untreated, who have leprosy can expect to live an average of ten years.

It usually starts with a feeling of fatigue and pain in the joints. Scaly spots develop on the skin, and the body becomes covered with lumps filled with puss. The face changes its shape, so that the sufferer would come to resemble a lion. Growths develop on the vocal chords so that the leper voice becomes raspy. The body begins to decompose, and the leper develops a terrible stench.

As you can imagine – no one wants to be around or touch these people.

But even worse than the isolation from being touched, leprosy deprives the victim of being able to feel what they touch. The disease attacks the nervous system, compromising the body's ability to feel pain. The leper might step on a stone or a thorn and injure his foot but be totally unaware that there's a problem. Infection sets in and eventually, the injured foot might just fall off.

Or the leper might try to wash his face in scalding water and blind himself.

Or he might reach into a fire to pick up a dropped potato and not realize he'd been burned.

(from a sermon by Alan Carr)

God imposed quarantine on those who suffered from this disease. They were “unclean” – forbidden to enter the Temple; forbidden to have contact with their loved ones; commanded to shout “unclean, unclean” whenever they came into contact with other people .

They were not to touch... or be touched by anyone.

To touch a leper was to expose yourself to the disease and risk being infected.
And NOBODY really wanted to touch them anyway.

But among the first healings Jesus performed... was a leper.

WHY? Why did Jesus choose to heal this leper?

Because, this man was an outcast... shunned by society and cut off from his God.

This was the very type of person Jesus had come to heal.

The Jews might not have known a particular individual was a tax collector.

They may not have always known when they passed a prostitute.

BUT the man who had leprosy carried his disease in his body.

He couldn't hide his sickness from the crowds.

Matthew 11 tells us that when John the Baptist was in prison, and heard about Jesus' ministry, he sent word by some of his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. Matthew 11:2-5

In other words – if you want to know if I'm the one who was to come, pay attention to who I've healed.

That's what Jesus declared in John 5:36 when people attacked Him for claiming God as Father: “...the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing bear witness about me that the Father has sent me.”

The people Jesus healed were His calling card, and the most prominent healing Jesus could possibly have done was to heal a leper.

But the real story here is NOT that Jesus healed the leper.

The real story here was that Jesus TOUCHED the man.

Now Jesus touched many people when He healed them

- Peter's mother-in-law was healed when Jesus touched her hand.
- He touched the eyes of blind men and healed them.
- He put his fingers into the ears of a deaf man and returned his hearing.
- He touched the lifeless hand of a girl on her deathbed and raised her from the dead.

Jesus healed many people that He healed, but Jesus DIDN'T HAVE TO touch people to heal them. All Jesus had to do was speak and people would be healed

For example in Luke 17:12-14 we're told for the time that Jesus met 10 lepers in a village in Samaria. He didn't touch them. Instead he told them to go see the priest... and on their way there they were healed.

Jesus never touched those lepers.

But He touched this man

Why?

Why touch this man – this man deformed by this horrible and unclean disease - when He really didn't have to?

Well... notice what it says in verse 41

"Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man..." Mark 1:41
The English Standard Version says it this way: "Moved with pity, he ... touched him..."

There was something this man needed that others didn't.

This man NEEDED MORE than just healing.

He NEEDED to be touched.

ILLUS: Another preacher told of the time he visited a woman in the hospital. The sign read on the door read: "Please see nurse before entering."

When he went to the nurse's station, the nurse explained that they didn't know what the woman was suffering from but they believed she was contagious. This preacher was instructed to wash his hands put on a cloth gown, latex gloves, and a cloth cap. And only then could he go into the patient's room.

When he got to the woman's bedside, she smiled weakly and told him how good it was to see him. They talked for a long while and when the time came for him to leave the preacher asked if there was anything he could do for her.

She answered:

"I just wish somebody would hold my hand without one of those gloves on."

She longed for the touch of a human hand.
A touch unhindered by the shield of a latex glove.
A human touch that said she was cared for and loved.

That's why Jesus touched so many people during His ministry.
Jesus was the Son of God. "God in the Flesh".
As John 3:16 declared: God so loved us that He gave us His only begotten Son.

Touching people was one of the most basic ways that Jesus (God in the flesh) could tell people He loved them, that He cared for them, that He had pity on them for what they suffered in this world.

Touching is the most basic expression of love and it creates a connection between the ones who are touched and the one touches.

ILLUS: It is said that the eastern shepherd (as he brings his sheep back to the fold each night) stands at the entrance of the pen and counts each one of them as they pass. As he does so, he puts his hand on the head of each animal he makes a habit of touching each one of them. In fact he does this with his sheep many times throughout the day. Why does he do that?

Because his touch is the way that his sheep know WHO he is. And because they know WHO he is they know they know HIS voice when he speaks to them.

Scripture says we are His people and the sheep of His pasture.
He cares for us in a way that no one else could.
And He shows His love and care for us in the most basic of ways.
He touches us.

But there is a problem for many of us Christians. We receive Christ's special attention. He touches our lives and then many of us get the impression that Christianity is "all about us" It's all about Jesus "touching" them. It's all about Jesus meeting their needs and answering their prayers. They live their entire Christian lives focused on that privilege as if was the complete nature of what Christianity was all about. But 1 John 4 tells us "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ... Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him." 1 John 4:8 & 16

What that passage is telling us is this: We are called imitate the love of Jesus.
We are called to be a people of love.
If we're going to learn to love like Jesus loved... we need to learn to touch others as

Jesus touched us.

Jesus calls us to be people who are determined to touch people who need to be touched.

ILLUS: Now, we're real good at touching here. We're a hugging church here. It's been that way for years, even before I got here.

But not everybody likes to be hugged. I've encountered a couple of people that the moment they sensed I was going to hug them they froze and shrank away from me. But they would allow me to place my hand gently on their shoulder, take their hand gently in mine.

When Jesus touched the leper, I don't think he hugged him.

I can picture Jesus standing before this man and – moved with pity and compassion – instinctively reaching out his hand and placing it gently on the man's head... or on his shoulder. Or He may have taken the man's hand in His.

BUT – He touched him, because nobody else would.

And it was in that touch that Jesus showed people how much God loved them.

It was that touch that has changed the lives of millions over the years.

CLOSE: A man named Doug Nichols told of the time in 1967 when he was part of a missionary outreach in India. But his trip was sidelined when he developed tuberculosis. He was forced to stay in a sanitarium there for several months. He said he didn't speak the language yet, but I tried to give Christian literature written in their language to the patients, doctors, and nurses.

BUT everyone politely refused. He sensed many weren't happy about a rich American (to them all Americans are rich) being in a free, government-run sanitarium. (They didn't know he was broke).

The first few nights he woke around 2:00 A.M. coughing. He wrote:

“One morning during my coughing spell, I noticed one of the older and sicker patients across the aisle trying to get out of bed. He would sit up on the edge of the bed and try to stand, but in weakness would fall back into bed.

I didn't understand what he was trying to do. He finally fell back into bed exhausted. I heard him crying softly.

The next morning I realized what the man had been trying to do.

He had been trying to get up and walk to the bathroom!

The stench in our ward was awful. Other patients yelled insults at the man. Angry nurses moved him roughly from side to side as they cleaned up the mess. One nurse

even slapped him.

The old man curled into a ball and wept.

The next night I again woke up coughing. I noticed the man across the aisle sit up and again try to stand. Like the night before, he fell back whimpering.

I don't like bad smells, and I didn't want to become involved but I got out of bed and went over to him. When I touched his shoulder, his eyes opened wide with fear. I smiled, put my arms under him, and picked him up. He was very light due to old age and advanced TB.

I carried him to the washroom, which was just a filthy, small room with a hole in the floor. I stood behind him with my arms under his armpits as he took care of himself.

After he finished, I picked him up, and carried him back to his bed.

As I laid him down, he kissed me on the cheek, smiled, and said something I couldn't understand.

The next morning another patient woke me and handed me a steaming cup of tea. He motioned with his hands that he wanted a tract. As the sun rose, other patients approached and indicated they also wanted the booklets. Throughout the day nurses, interns, and doctors asked for literature.

What made the difference? Why did so many respond that had rejected his literature just days before? The difference was that he had touched a man others avoided... and he changed the lives of dozens because of it. (Bothell, WA Leadership, Vol. 15, no. 2.)

Each Sunday I've tried to give you an assignment.

A way to learn how to follow Jesus better.

This week's assignment is to touch someone.

- Do you have someone at work or in your family who is hard to get along with? Do they need prayer for a conflict in their lives (of course they do, that's what happens with people who are difficult to have around). Ask them if you can pray for their difficulty. Then tell them that you're going to pray for them right then and there. Take their hand, or place your hand on their shoulder... but touch them. And pray for them. You'll communicate two things: that someone cared enough to pray for them and someone cared enough to touch them.

- OR go to the nursing home and take some cookies to share. Geraldine (one of our members here) just had one of her sisters die and I went to the funeral to show my respects. The daughter stood and told about her mother taking her to the nursing

home and passing out cookies. Her mother's explanation: nobody takes the people in the nursing home cookies. No one takes the time to go and visit with them. Their families will a lot of times not bother to come and spend time with them.

Years ago, one of our deacons (Bill) would regularly go to the nursing homes and talk with many of the patients there. He'd read to them and bring them special treats.

Go to the nursing home this week and touch the hands of someone who's there.

- OR go down to Emmaus (a local homeless shelter) and volunteer to help with the people who live there. As you serve – touch someone who is there.
- OR determine that you want to go to Haiti with the Goods... or go to a nearby mission and help out... and touch someone there.

INVITATION:

But until Jesus has touched you, you may not be able to bring His healing to the lives of others. Today you may need His TOUCH of forgiveness and healing in your own life.

That's why we offer this time of invitation...