

KEEP IN TOUCH

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Jeremiah 1:4-10

Mark 10:13-16

There is a chapel in the Vatican called the Sistine Chapel, in which a large array of biblical frescoes can be viewed. Among them are some painted by the great master, Michelangelo. Nearly 500 years ago, in 1508, he was commissioned by Pope Julius II, to adorn the chapel appropriately. Over the next four years, after suffering through several hindrances, he worked on the paintings until they were completed. Not to everyone's satisfaction, but that's another story. One of his themes was The Creation and segments of that story are depicted among the frescos he painted.

One of my favorites from among these depictions is the one we have all seen reproduced in various contexts. It is the one on the chapel ceiling that shows God on the right side of the picture – a white-bearded figure in the midst of various heavenly personages – God stretching out his hand with an extended finger, just about to touch a similarly extended hand and finger belonging to a recumbent Adam who is on the left. Michelangelo symbolically saw this contact – the touch by God – as the way that Adam became a living being.

The Bible has it a different way: we are told in the ancient Hebrew account that makes up the second creation story beginning in the second chapter of Genesis, that God breathed life into Adam and that Adam then became a living being. Moreover, God created humans in God's image. Since God is spirit, then humans also somehow possess that spirit. This concept came from the creation account that appears in the first chapter of Genesis, actually written some three hundred years after the one in the second chapter. How the early Hebrews writes or later artist like Michelangelo depicted the details of creation is not as important as the point that it was God who was responsible for the creation of human beings. My belief is that God has been touching the lives of people ever since. As though we needed to get our spiritual batteries recharged every once in awhile. The spark needs fanning. The spirit needs renewal.

Ah, yes, the spirit. The Hebrews had a name for it. Interestingly enough, they used the same word for spirit as they did for wind. In Hebrew, it's ruach. The Bible speaks often of both the spirit of God and the spirit of the human. The Psalmist, in the 143 chapter, says this" "Make haste to answer me, Lord, for my spirit fails!" and a few verses further along, again speaking to God, "Let they good spirit lead me on a level path". Remember the hymn, Breathe on me, breath of God?" Breathe on me spirit of God. Let your breathe reach out to me. Touch me with it. And as your breath is received, we are visited by your spirit. This is one way of suggesting that we are created in God's image, and continue to share in that image, because God continues to sustain us with God's touch, that breath, that holy wind. That Holy Spirit.

Now, we must ask, in what way does that ouch manifest itself? Part of the answer can be found, I believe, in the accounts of Jesus' movements around the Judean

countryside. Perhaps one of this morning's scripture readings – Jesus' encounter with children – remind you of the many times when Jesus touched people. It was important for him to reach out to them. This particular account appears in Matthew's and Luke's gospels as well as in Mark's. In other places he also reached out to touch someone:

Jesus put forth his hand and touched him, and he is healed.
He touched her and the fever left her.
Then touched he their eyes ... and their eyes were opened.
And they brought children to him that he might touch them.
And he came and touched the bier ... and the young man got up and began to speak.
And he touched his ear and healed him.

Inherent in our beliefs is the conviction that God reached out and touched humanity through Jesus of Nazareth. Not just with his fingers, but with his words and with his actions.

And it wasn't just a matter of being touched by Jesus that was recorded in the gospels. Again and again there were people who wanted to touch him or, if not directly, then his garment. They believed that he possessed something – some power – that could be accessed if they could only touch him. It inspired them to do so.

Within the life of the church – the body of Christ – touch has several significant manifestations. There is the touch of the pastor at baptism; there is the touch of the ministers participating in the ordination of a new pastor in the laying on of hands; there is the touch of a groom as he places a ring on his bride's finger and the bride as she places the ring on his. There are handshakes and back pats, as well as hands held around the table when grace is said. Touching is an act shared within the fellowship of the faithful.

The church is the body of Christ. The church is people. Therefore people manifest that sacred touch. It is we who reach out and touch others for God and in the name of Jesus. It is our calling. It is our mission. It is our responsibility. To do otherwise is to deny the premise that God continues to reach out and touch people. Our fingers are God's not to point with, but to touch with. OK, if that is so, then how do we get touched? We certainly will need God's touch if we are to be sustained in our touching of others for God. How do we get our spiritual batteries recharged and energized?

It is very difficult to touch someone else without being touched in return. Could it be that in touching someone for God we receive something from God even in that touch? Not too long ago Jo and I shared in the Meals on Wheels program by helping to bring food to a number of folks who otherwise wouldn't have had a nourishing meal for that day. At the home of one elderly lady who had difficulty moving about, I had placed her food on her kitchen table, and turned to leave. She stood between me and the door extended her two hands and grasped on of mine firmly, looked me in the eye and said, "God bless you". I was touched!

That is certainly one way we can be touched by God. We can also be touched when we find ourselves in positions of need, whatever that need might be. There may be someone whose perception is keen enough to recognize our need and respond to it. Whether it is depression, or pain, grief, loneliness, fear, anxiety or whatever else ... maybe there is someone there to help with a warm touch, a friendly arm about the shoulders, an assisting hand to get where we need to go. God got Adam going with a touch, according to Michelangelo's picture. We have it in our power to help get someone going.

Each of us has something to do in the body of Christ as that body reaches out to touch others. With the wind that is God's spirit providing the spiritual lift, we can do what we are suppose to be doing ... touch the lives of others in ways that help inspire them and perhaps encourage them to also reach out. We can do things we wouldn't expect of ourselves. Remember what Jeremiah said to God when God had told him he had been appoint a prophet to the nations? "Ah, Lord, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth". And God replied, "Do not say 'I am only a youth!'" Then God put forth his hand and touched Jeremiah's mouth and said

Behold! I have put my words in your mouth.

I have set you this day over nations ...

To build and to plant.

It is necessary to do some touching in order to build and to plant.

In one of the famous Peanuts comic strips, we see Charlie Brown and Linus standing together. Charlie Brown is looking at a piece of paper on which Linus has drawn a picture of a man. Charlie Brown tells Linus, "That is a very nice drawing of a man, Linus" and he goes on "I notice however that you've drawn him with his hands behind his back" No response from Linus. Charlie Brown continues: "You did that because you yourself have feelings of insecurity" Finally Linus responds: "I did that because I myself cannot draw hands."

Sometimes I suspect we don't reach out to others because we are not certain how our action will be received. Maybe Charlie Brown was right in one respect. Maybe we have some insecurity about reaching out ... showing our hands. If we don't know how our hands will be accepted, we hide them behind our backs, figuratively speaking. But it is not just up to us. We have been reached out to so that we can reach out.

We would be remiss if we didn't think about two more ways through which we can be touched by God. The first of course, is by way of our sacred scriptures. The Word of God we call this collection of writings. To be touched by God's Word is to be affected by what we read as we think about it in ways we would not otherwise be affected. Sometimes the touch will come as we search for help in the pages. Other times it will come when we read without having a specific purpose in mind, just to be reading these words. We will be inspired. That is an interesting word. If you look up the word "inspire" in a dictionary that traces word origins, you will discover that you are referred

to the section on 'spirit'. To be inspired is to be transfused with spirit. The wind of God blowing again. To receive the spirit.

The other way in which we can be touched, or touch others, is perhaps the most personal way of all. It is through prayer. We are touched by others as they pray for us. Just as your lives and the lives of others can be affected by *our* prayers, so also can they be affected by the prayers of others. This is the touch of faith that rests in a faith relationship with God. If we believe that we are created in God's image, and if we believe that God is spirit, then there must be that within our being that represents that spiritual image. When we pray we are reaching out to touch that from which our spiritual self has come. And to be touched by it. Again, we want to be inspired. We seek that infusion of the spirit that can affect our lives. Is it not this that we seek through the sacraments after all? Was it not this that Michelangelo was symbolically painting?

Our sense of touch is an important part of what we are as humans. Michael Sims, in this book *Adam's Navel*, points out something about which I hadn't really thought before or realized. "The human body perceives the world through its senses, and there is no sense but touch." You taste chocolate when its molecules touch your tongue. You hear music when sound waves touch the inner ear mechanism that pass along the sensations for interpretation by your brain. You smell coffee because minute particles of it float through the air and touch the receptors in your nose. You see the colors of sunlit leaves because photons affected by the colors enter your eyes and touch the receptors at the back of the eyes that send the signals to your brain that are interpreted as the colors and forms.

Just as touch is essential for our lives, so is it also essential for our calling as servants of God. Touching feeds, heals, comforts, raises up, supports and leads. It welcomes, calms, and energizes. Touching communicates feelings like compassion or love. Just as God reached out and touched Adam to give him life and spirit, and just as Jesus reached out and touched others, so also are we called to reach out and touch people to give them what they need for life and to nurture their spirits. With our words or actions, and with our prayers.

The touch of God is near, I'm told,
But somehow I had never found it so;
I dared not say there is no touch, how bold
Would such a statement be, I surely know.
But then you heard my cry, you saw my tears,
I felt your touch; the calm with me grew,
You helped me ease those aching fears,
And then I knew, God's touch reached me .. through you.

Keep in touch!