

## "THE HUMAN TOUCH"

TEXT: "And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth his hand, and touched him and said unto him, 'I will: be thou clean'"

(Mark 1: 41)

### INTRODUCTION

I wonder how that leper must have felt. All he was seeking was a cure. All he expected was an incantation of some sort - the chanting of a magic formula. He was an outcast, feared and shunned by everybody. When out of doors, he had to wear a cloth about his face. He had to cry "unclean, unclean" so that no one came to close to him. Yet Jesus ignored the taboo, went right up to him, touched him. It was something the man would never forget. I'm sure that every time he told the story he would bring it to a climax by saying, "And then...He touched me".

This gesture on the part of Jesus was instinctive and spontaneous, a natural expression of the compassion that welled up in His heart when He was confronted with misery and loneliness. Nothing that concerned others was a matter of indifference to Him. He entered readily and swiftly into their joys and sorrows, never stood aloof or kept people at arm's length. He had a warm, outgoing nature and what He felt was communicated by His whole being - the look in His eyes, the words on His lips, the touch of His hands. Studdert Kennedy wrote these lines for Advent:

"The Christ who was born on Christmas Day  
Laid on the world His two small hands,  
Lifting it worlds and worlds away,  
Up to the level of Love's demands".

### SENSE OF TOUCH

The sense of touch is what we're thinking about here today. Touch is the sense which love employs. It can communicate feeling and express affection as words, no matter how eloquent or lofty, cannot convey. A woman in a moment of self-revelation tells a friend about some trouble she's having, and while she is speaking, the friend lays a hand on her arm and by that single, simple, wordless gesture expresses solicitude and concern.

"A husband" - here I'm drawing on an illustration used by psychiatrist, Smiley Blanton - "helping his wife on with her coat, rests his hands for a moment on her shoulders and thus says, 'I love you' as clearly as if he wrote it on the ceiling in letters of fire". What endears the father of the Prodigal Son to many of us is that while the ne'er-do-well was still a long way off the father saw him, and his heart went out to him, and he ran to meet him, flung his arms about him and kissed him.

In a Scottish novel, My Lady of the Chimney Corner, old Anna says to a younger woman:

"Listen dar, God takes a hand wherever he can find it, and does just what he likes with it. Sometimes He takes a Bishop's hand and lays it on a child's head in a benediction, then He takes the hand of a doctor to relieve pain, the hand

of a mother to guide her child, and sometimes He takes the hand of an old critter like me to give a bit of comfort to a neighbor. But they're all hands touched by His spirit - and His spirit is everywhere looking for hands to use".

OUT OF TOUCH One of the problems of our day is the problem of communication. We have conquered distance, spanned the continents, put men on the moon, fly from NY to Paris in three hour, but so often in our personal relations we are sadly out of touch, nations with nations, people with people. As Rudyard Kipling put it, "We are like islands, and we shout to one another across seas of misunderstanding".

Especially in great cities with their crowds, the pace of life fast and furious, the pressure and competition unrelenting, we are liable to lose the human touch. Surrounded by things, we become less and less aware of people. And though we may not intend it and though we may be entirely unconscious of it, we develop an impersonal attitude - ~~an air of detachment, sometimes even of aloofness.~~ Taken up with making a living, busy with our own personal problems, we may not notice human need. It may stare us in the face, and we may not take it in with our eyes. And opportunities of showing little courtesies and performing simple kindnesses may pass us by. We so easily forget that next to bread, kindness is the food all mortals hunger for and the one essential vitamin of the soul.

Social agencies are indispensable in great cities and should have out support, but even more indispensable is the personal touch of life on life. As they say in basketball, "going one on one".

Francis of Assisi came to the turning point of his life and found his vocation when he realized that little good was done by throwing a coin to a beggar. He had to dismount from his horse, get alongside the beggar, befriend him, reach out to him a brotherly hand. It was not enough to send a subscription to the local leper house. He had to go among the lepers. He faced the hardest of tests when the challenge came to him to overcome fear, disgust, squeamishness, visit the leper house, go round to each of the sufferers, kiss the hand of each, then put a coin in it.

We in our time must work out some equivalent of that loving act of self-identification with human suffering.

FAMILY And our family life as well as our city life is frequently impersonal in character. Often there is a breakdown in communication where we think we have every right to expect understanding and affinity - the relationships of parents and children. It is a tragedy of many a home that the older and the younger generations are sadly out of touch with each other. There is propinquity, but no community. There ought to be more sharing of interests, recreations, ideals, beliefs.

Remember that touching scene in Thornton Wilder's play "Our Town" where Emily, the young bride who had died in childbirth was permitted to go back to her home in Grover's Corners and relive her 12th birthday. The experience was so disillusioning. Everybody - mother, father, sisters, brothers - seemed so busy, so pre-occupied, no time to stop, to notice, to feel, to realize life and enjoy it while they were living it together.

"Oh mama" she cried. "Just look at me one minute as if you really saw me...just for a moment we're all together... moma, just for a moment we're happy. Let's look at one another".

Smiley Blaton, the psychiatrist, once told a group of us how he would sit in his office day after day and hear bewildered people say, "But doctor, I just can't reach him". Or, "I can't get through to her". "I talk my head off but that child just doesn't listen". What counsel did he offer? I quote him:

"Very often my questions must puzzle those already puzzled souls. 'Tell me' I ask him, 'how long is it since you have taken a walk with your arm around your wife?' 'Do you ever get down on the living room floor and roughhouse or tussle with your kids?' 'Has your family ever tried holding hands around the dinner table when you say grace?'"

Such questions may sound superficial, but they are not. They are designed to crack the shell of isolation that surrounds the troubled person by using one of the greatest of all channels of communication: the mysterious and universal, but sadly neglected language of touch. It is the Christ spirit in action...

#### CULTIVATING THE HUMAN TOUCH

How can this human touch be cultivated? For one thing, we cannot have it without some measure of self-knowledge. Only in proportion as we understand ourselves can we make headway in understanding others. And, as an Italian proverb reminds us: "Clear understanding means long friendships".

And we cannot have it without imagination - that ability or quality which enables us to put ourselves intensively in the place of others, to sit where they sit, to see with their eyes, to feel with their nerves. And we cannot have it without compassion - a nature warm, out-going, patient, seen to perfection for a few brief years in this world in the life of the man from Nazareth - compassion - absolute in self-forgetfulness, exhaustless in helpfulness.

God takes strange ways of schooling souls. For years they maintain the even tenor of their lives. Everything goes well with them, so well that they tend to take everything for granted - health, home, happiness, friendships. And then, sometimes with appalling suddenness, they are in the deep waters of life. But what lessons they learn. Understanding deepened, imagination quickened, compassion aroused, the human touch acquired. So often through suffering, we grow inwardly.

However it is acquired - whether in the school of suffering or a native gift - it is a great thing to have, to possess this human touch. It is full of understanding for it knows how easy it is to fail and fall, how difficult to live nobly and wisely.

It is a spirit that never

~~and this is why it never~~ makes quick, harsh judgements, but seeks always to win without wounding. It gets to the heart of a situation as nothing else can. It has an instinct for what ought to be done and how to do it. It prefers action to speech and would rather visit someone who is lonely and unhappy than make orations about brotherhood. It believes in people and gives itself to them without reserve. It knows no barriers of rank or class, of creed or of

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color. It enters a slum with as much respect as a palace. It sees sorrow where it is bravely hidden and virtue where it is least expected. It is forever on the watch for those who require a helping hand.

It is the spirit of Christ in action. That spirit is desperately needed in places like this city. The damning sin of our time is to be in a world of need and not see it. The human touch. What is a church worth - no matter how beautiful its sanctuary or how stately its service of worship - if its members are lacking in the human touch.

It was St. Paul who long ago said: "Through love be servants to one another; for the whole law is fulfilled in one word - thou shalt love Thy neighbor as thyself". And St. John was no less emphatic when he wrote:

"Beloved, let us love one another...he who does not love does not know God....but if we love one another, God dwells within us, and His love is perfected in us. Let us put our love not into words or talk, but into deeds and make it real".

PRAYER Let our prayer in these moments be a silent searching of our hearts, to see if we be lacking in this quality...the human touch that makes a difference, that helps and heals. Help us to cultivate the imagination, the compassion, the understanding that we see so clearly in the life of Him whose day of birth we shall soon be celebrating. In His spirit, we pray. Amen

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### OUT OF TOUCH

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