

"THE TOUCH THAT HEALS"

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 was expecting was an incantation of some sort - the chanting of a magic formula. He was an outcast - feared and shunned by everybody. He had to wear a cloth about his face when in the out of doors. He had to cry "unclean, unclean" so that no one came to close to him. And yet Jesus ignored the taboo, went right up to him, and touched him. It was something the man would never forget. Forever after - whenever he told his story of how he had been healed by the man from Nazareth, he would climax it 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 whenever He was confronted with human misery and loneliness. Nothing that concerned others was ever a matter of indifference to Him. He entered readily and swiftly into their joys and their sorrows, never stood aloof or kept people at arm's length. He had a warm, affectionate, 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"

THE SENSE OF TOUCH

The sense of touch is what we are 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. For instance, a woman in a moment of self-revelation tells a friend about some trouble she is having, and while she is speaking, the friend places a hand on her arm and by that simple, wordless gesture expresses concern and sympathy. Or, "a husband (and here I am drawing on an illustration offered by a psychiatrist) helping his wife on with her coat, rests his hands for a moment on her shoulders and ~~there~~ by this gesture says 'I love you' as clearly as if he had written it on the ceiling in larger letters of fire". Touch is the sense which love employs.

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 (hand of a father mother to guide her child, and sometimes He takes the hand of to discipline) 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 time is the problem of communication. We have conquered distance, spanned the continents - but in personal relationships we are sadly out of touch - person with person, nation with nation, classes with classes, people of one color with people of another color. We have

learned a great deal about Mars and we may soon land men on the moon, but we are estranged and alienated from our fellow human beings. We have achieved propinquity, not community. Rudyard Kipling once said: WE ARE LIKE ISLANDS, AND WE SHOUT TO ONE ANOTHER ACROSS SEAS OF MISUNDERSTANDING.

THE CITY Especially in great cities with their crowds, the pace of life fast and feverish, the pressure and competition unrelenting, we are liable to lose the human touch. Surrounded by things, we become less and less aware of people. Though we may not intend it and though we may be entirely unconscious of it, we develop an impersonal attitude - an air of detachment, 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 our generous support, but even more indispensable is the personal touch of life on life. For that there is simply no substitute. Work done on a church committee, or a community welfare organization does not take its place, nor does a check - however substantial. Each of us in our own way must work out some way of personally identifying ourselves with and confronting human misery, and loneliness. The personal touch of one life on another life. Don't overlook it; don't neglect it.

THE FAMILY And our family life as well as our city life frequently has an impersonal 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. And there ought to be more sharing of interests, recreations, ideas, ideals and beliefs.

Remember that touching scene in Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" - 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 disillusioning. Everybody - her mother, father, sisters and brothers - seemed so busy, so preoccupied, no time to stop, to notice, to feel, to realize life and enjoy it while they were living it. "Oh mama" she cried, "just look at me one minute as if you really saw me...just for a moment we're all together. Mama, just for a moment we're happy. Let's look at one another".

I'm sure that some of you remember the story of the hoodlums who broke into the department store several weeks before Christmas. It bears retelling. They didn't steal or destroy anything. They just had a wonderful time - switching price tags. The next morning customers were puzzled and delighted to find fur coats selling for \$5.00. Cold cream was priced at \$150. A silver service was marked for \$1.75 and a pair of ladies' hose \$390. There were umbrellas for \$1000. and diamond rings for \$2.. Has something come into our lives and switched the price tags? Are material gifts worth more than the gifts of the spirit. We seem to be emphasizing the wrong things. When our children long for our time, our love, our attention, our understanding - what do we give them - a pair of roller skates,

Smiley Blanton, the psychiatrist to whom I referred earlier, tells how he sits in his office day after day and hears bewildered people say, "But Doctor, I just can't reach him". Or, "I just can't seem to get through to her". Or, "I talk my head off but that child just won't listen to me". What counsel does he offer. Let me quote his words to you:

"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 children?' '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.

CULTIVATING THE HUMAN TOUCH

The question facing us now is: how can we cultivate the human touch? 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 has it: CLEAR UNDERSTANDINGS MEAN LONG FRIENDSHIPS. We cannot have it without IMAGINATION - the 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, affectionate, outgoing, patient, seen to perfection for a few brief years in this world in the life of the man from Nazareth - compassion - exhaustless in helpfulness, absolute in self-forgetfulness.

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, work and 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. All of us have known people who have grown by what they have suffered.

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. And this is why it never makes quick, harsh judgments, but seeks to win without wounding. It gets to the heart of a situation as nothing else can. 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 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.

NEEDED TODAY

And how we need that spirit today. In this space age with distance annihilated and the continents bridged, the world was never so full of strangers - nor the strangers so full of antagonisms, deficient in understanding, imagination and compassion, unable to put themselves in the place of others, to visualize their lives, to think as they think and feel as they feel. The damning sin of our time is to be in a world of need and not to see it. This is a sin that many a person who sits quietly in a church on a Sunday morning is apt to be guilty of.

We need this spirit in the church. Mind you, these are days when Christians have to prove that belief in God is more than a sentiment, that it inspires concern for people and expressed itself in serving their needs. I am not talking about something marginal or peripheral. I am talking about the central and supreme simplicity of the Gospel. The human touch - the touch that heals - this is the heart of the matter.

I raise this question in your thinking: what is a church worth - no matter how beautiful its sanctuary, or how stately its service of worship, if its members lack this one essential quality.

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. My dear children, let us put our love not into words or talk, but into deeds and make it real".

This is demanding. This is what we should be doing, doing far more than we are. It is a plea for the human touch - the touch that heals, that helps, that lifts.

LET US PRAY As we move toward Christmas, help us O God, to search our own lives to see whether we are lacking in this quality - the human touch that reaches into the lives of others. Help us to cultivate the imagination, the compassion and the understanding that we see so clearly in the life of Him whose day of birth we shall soon celebrate. In his name we pray. Amen