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H. J. 5012
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6th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – CYCLE B

STAYING IN TOUCH

The Text: Mark 1:40-45

Human skin. We are fascinated with it. We fuss over it. We hide or enhance its features with make-up. We obsess over its wrinkles, scars, or blemishes. But the main feature of skin is not beauty, it is border. Skin defines our border, our boundary. The human skin is the surface of our contact with the world. Did you know that the human skin has over three miles of blood vessels coiled up within it? And more remarkable than that, the skin of each human also contains over thirty-six miles of nerves and nerve endings! Imagine that! Each of us has a virtual interstate highway system of nerves within our skin. Some of those nerves carry signals for pain, others for the sense of heat or cold, and others the sense of pressure or touch. God has made each of us wondrously intricate.

Do you remember the day all of that highway system opened at once, the day you held hands with that special person for the first time? You were sweating in places you didn't know you had places. Your pulse was pounding. And you became aware for the first time how wonderful it was to touch, and to be touched. Ah, the innocence and power of that moment!

But what if your nerve endings did not work at all? What if the entire nerve highway system was shut down? You could feel no heat, no cold, no pain, no pleasure. You could feel nothing at all. Imagine how terrible that would be! Such was the plight of the leper in the days of Jesus. An illness infected the nervous system, effectively shutting it down. As a result, the person so afflicted could not feel the pain of a stumped toe, or cut finger. After a while, lepers looked grotesque with deformed features, especially at their hands and feet, from injuries sustained walking around without the sense of pain. Add to this suffering, lepers in the first century were outcasts from society because of fear of contagion, and because proper religious folk considered lepers to bear the curse of God.

No one felt more cut-off from society, and from God, than lepers. And that is why Jesus headed straight for the lepers when he came to earth. His mission? Restore them to the human family, and restore them to God. Jesus came to help everyone stay in touch in God. According to our gospel reading for today, he just started where the need was greatest, with a leper.

I. Jesus touched the leper because no one should be excluded from the circle of human touch.

Touching heals, simple as that. If you refrain from caressing a baby it will get sick and die, even if it has proper nutrition and a sterile environment. When we injure our bodies, we want the touch of a medical professional (is that why patients often feel warmer to nurses than physicians, since the nurse is often more available for human touch?), or at least the kiss and rub of a mom. When our muscles are sore we seek a massage therapist. When we have a stomach ache, we rub or hold our tummy. We seek touch when we are hurt because we know that touch heals.

Of course, touch can also harm. Far too many people bear the invisible scars of being touched wrongly, sinfully, by someone they thought they could trust. Victims of rape and child abuse bear the

scars of that sinful touch. Sure, touching can be wrong. The first prohibition to humankind was in the Garden of Eden, when God himself told Adam and Eve not to eat from a certain tree, and *not to touch it*. Sometimes we should not touch because touch can be sinful. And sometimes we should not touch because to do so would be dangerous. When your mother tells you not to touch the hot stove, she is not depriving you of some grand adult pleasure!

II. But Jesus also healed the leper because he wanted to show that God was in the business of touching, especially the untouchables.

For Jesus, no one, absolutely no one, was untouchable. Prostitutes were not untouchables just because they trafficked in sinful touch. Poor people were not untouchable just because they smelled from inadequate hygiene. Lepers, or any other sick person, were not untouchable just because they might be contagious. And sinners of all kinds were not untouchable just because they had sinned. In a world that loves to separate and quarantine the untouchables from the "insiders," this is radical indeed!

Read the gospel of Mark and you will see Jesus extending his hand and embrace in every chapter. Soon people came just to be touched by him, or just to touch him or his garments. Even healthy children were brought for Jesus to embrace. It is as if Jesus wanted to illustrate God as One who loves to touch his creation. Isn't this the way Michelangelo painted God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel—as a God reaching out to give life by the gift of touch?

So what did the enemies of Jesus do to stop those life-giving, child-embracing, illness-healing hands? They tried to pin them down on a cross, like a butterfly's wings on a science exhibit. But God will not be stopped by a few nails. Although He felt the searing pain in the hands of Jesus, he also feels the numbing isolation of the untouchable. When fear or bigotry creates solitary confinement for any of the human family, God will not stand idly by. He sent Jesus to mend such tears in the human fabric. And Jesus sent us to do the same.

So let's all leave here today looking for the "leper" in our society. He may be poor. Her skin may be a different color. He may be the new kid at school. She may have an abrasive personality. But whoever, or wherever, we find him, let's be the extended hands of Jesus.

Whatever we do, let's stay in touch.