

“The Five Love Languages: Physical Touch”

A Sermon for University Congregational Church

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Traditional Word

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Contemporary Word

“your hand
touching mine.
this is how
galaxies
collide.”

— Sanober Khan

“The Five Love Languages: Physical Touch”

Stephen Colbert during his Wednesday night Late Show this week told us that this is the time for all of us to come together. To come together—by staying as far apart as possible. What a topic for a sermon during the time of Social Distancing. Physical Touch! At a time when it's suggested we don't get close to each other, what on earth are we doing talking about touch? Aside from the fact that it is the next sermon topic in our series of The Five Love Languages, it seems counter intuitive that we'd spend time on physical touch this morning—when we've been told to stay far away from other humans.

Well, I think now is the perfect time for us to explore this love language—not just in the intimate terms of human touch, but in the broader context of our humanity. We're mammals and we require the touch of other mammals. It's built into our wiring! And at a time when our personal contact is limited and we may feel cut-off from one another I think it appropriate to look at the physiological and psychological bases for this need for touch.

We've known for years that physical touch is an effective and important way to communicate emotional love—and for some it is their preferred “Love Language”. They just may not know it—not knowing our “love language” can lead to some interesting conflicts in our relationships.

There is lots of research to support this idea that physical touch is beneficial for us. We know that children who are held, stroked and kissed develop into more emotionally healthy adults than those who are neglected or deprived of touch for

longs periods. Physical touch is necessary for healthy human development. There's lots of data that shows that hugs have other health benefits as well. It lowers your blood pressure, boosts your immunity and may even help us control pain. And yet, of our "love languages" physical touch is the one that draws the most comments and intense reactions from individuals when we are discussing the love languages. And that has to do with boundaries and whether or not we have healthy ones. Physical touch is usually reserved for our most intimate relationships—there's not that many times in our workplaces or other mass social settings where physical touch other than a handshake or a simple pat on the shoulder, is appropriate. So of our love languages that translate outside of committed relationships and intimacy, physical touch is tricky because it requires a deeper connection than we have in most of our day-to-day relationships. And in this day of #metoo, it's often difficult to even know what is acceptable touch—so we just refrain from any sort of touch at all—even when someone may be craving the comfort of a hug.

So let's look at the basics of human touch—and perhaps discover why it is such an important part of our lives: Here are some facts concerning your sense of touch—perhaps the most overlooked of our senses.

Every one of us receives tactile information about the world around us every second of the day. Right now, if you're sitting, your rear-end is being squished into your chair. Your fingertips are probably touching a mouse, or swiping the glass of your phone. All this information is traveling to your brain all at once—in fact the only way to make sense of it is to tune most of it out — you probably weren't paying attention

to these sensations until I said those words. We can't turn off touch. It never goes away. We can close your eyes and imagine what it's like to be blind, and we can stop up our ears and imagine what it's like to be deaf. But touch is so central and ever-present in our lives that we can't imagine losing it.

Touch is also in part based on what we do with our bodies--it's been discovered that areas of the touch-sensing parts of your brain that you use a lot tend to expand and take over neighboring territory--a violin player who uses her left hand more than her bowing hand will have the area of her brain that processes information from her left hand expand and grow larger and take over parts of the neighboring brain tissue. Another interesting thing has to do with the effects of aging. It seems we all lose touch receptors over the course of our lives. It's not like we have them until a certain age, then they suddenly disappear — we lose them very, very slowly. They peak around age 16 or 18, then disappear slowly. You also lose pain and temperature receptors. As we age we might not feel as much surface pain on our skin—and this might also be one of the factors that lead older persons to take falls. We stay upright in part because of sensations on the bottom of our feet, and we get less of that information the older we get.

It has also been studied as to why touch is so mysteriously crucial for a baby's development. The best examples of this come from Romanian orphanages after Ceausescu's fall, when there just weren't enough people around to take care of babies. They were barely touched during the day--These kids didn't just have a host of emotional problems — although they were depressed and had high instances of

schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and other issues — but they also had a whole raft of physical ailments. They had weakened immune systems, and numerous skin diseases. Other research has confirmed this phenomenon. We're not entirely sure why it happens, but it seems that early touch experiences are extraordinarily important for development of both cognitive function and a healthy body. This is why, nowadays, when premature infants are born and put in incubators, they're taken out for a few hours a day, and pressed against a parent's skin. Initially, when incubators were first invented, people thought you should just leave them in there all alone, so they wouldn't get infected. But then they might not get touched for the first two months of life, which turns out to be disastrous.

Oh, and I think it's important to know that touch shapes first impressions of people in weird ways. Incidental touch can help form our impressions of people's character. In one of the classic experiments, people were holding either a cold iced drink or a hot drink when meeting someone, and those with a hot drink literally rated the people they met as warmer — as in, having a more pro-social personality. They didn't rate them better overall — say, as smarter, or more competent — they just rated them as warmer. There was another famous study in which people evaluated others' resumes on a clipboard, and if they were on a heavy clipboard — rather than a really light one — they were rated as having more gravitas, more authority. Once again, people didn't think they were smarter, or better team players, or things like that. The weight made them seem weighty. When these studies first came out, no one really believed them — but they've since been well reproduced. It all points to an idea that's come up in social psychology again and again: if you're evaluating someone for the first

time, the first decision you make is friend or foe. Is this person warm, or are they a threat? Then the second thing you evaluate is whether they're competent — which means that it matters if they're a threat or not. And it seems that touch information helps us make these distinctions, even when it's irrelevant.

Touch is mentioned often in our Christian scriptures and we know that Jesus' touch healed people—at least that's what the bible tells us, but upon closer inspection, these stories probably have more to do with the afflicted being accepted back into community—that is—when Jesus touched someone who was ill or quarantined, he was signaling to those about him that it was okay to touch them—they could come back into the community. Very much how, during the early years of the HIV/AIDS crisis, when we saw someone as famous as Princess Diana touching and hugging victims of that disease, we witnessed that it was okay for us to touch our friends who were afflicted—our ignorance of the disease blinded us to the humanity of the victims—not unlike how we are easily distracted from the humanity of others by the words and behaviors we use to describe them: Afflicted—Unclean. All of these things can work together to deprive other people of their humanity. I'm not saying Jesus' touch wasn't miraculous and full of healing energy—something happened to these humans when they were touched by this man. Something inexplicable and beautiful—something that has given humans hope for millennia.

There's a story in our scriptures about a woman who had been shunned by her community because she had some sort of menstrual disorder. Let's hear her story found in the gospel of Mark: 25 “Now there was a woman who had been suffering

from hemorrhages for twelve years. 26 She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. 27 She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, 28 for she said, "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well." 29 Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. 30 Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my clothes?" 31 And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" 32 He looked all around to see who had done it. 33 But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. 34 He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

This was a bold woman then-- who approached Jesus in this way—secretly and without a male sponsor—a primary requirement in Jewish society at this time. But, because of her condition—her impurity—probably had cut her off from the religious community and from financial stability, she may have had no choice but to act daringly. The gospel tells us that she had suffered greatly under the care of the medical practitioners. Attention from these professionals was usually reserved for elite persons—people of high social standing—so she must have been someone—or known someone important. The "suffering" she had remains ambiguous but it may have related to the length of time she had her affliction, her severity of pain, or quite possibly the social scorn of being under the "care" of the specialists. Other women, throughout history (unfortunately even unto today), have had to act in this manner—

with daring and boldness--to retain their human dignity. Phyllis Wheatley published her poems under the scrutiny of Thomas Jefferson, Immanuel Kant, and numerous other (white, male) intellectuals of the day. Jarena Lee, the first ordained female minister, pursued her God-given call to preach. Rosa Parks wouldn't give up her seat.

This unnamed woman spoke—she used her voice-- and her words provide insight into the woman's thinking and her theological perspective. The act of not only touching him but touching even his clothes may provide healing from disease. This intricate theological rationale was then confirmed by her actual healing.

And just as the woman understood the changes in her body—her cure from her affliction, so, too, did Jesus recognized a change in his body. Remember, Jesus initially played no active role in her healing—she initiated it by her surreptitious touch. The drying up of her blood flow was due to the "discharge" of Jesus' "power". And no one else -- including the disciples present -- recognized what had transpired. Not even Jesus was fully aware of what had happened. But Jesus was unwilling to allow the outflow of his "power" to occur without acknowledgement. The "stealing" of a healing miracle was inappropriate. It was one thing for him to touch others but another matter altogether for someone to touch him.

In her next set of actions it was probably fear and not boldness that provoked her to come forward and admit what she had done. She stopped and presented herself to Jesus to reveal the "whole truth". She did not have to return. She could have escaped with her healing intact. But she apparently understood his intense look--the

Greek word used here is a common one used in the gospel of Mark--usually reserved for Jesus' glare and she may have recognized the potential for public shame if she were caught by this male healer. The cultural weight of her situation demanded her return and fess up to her actions.

Imagine how many people in that crowd must blanched after hearing the "truth" that this bleeding, unclean woman had come into contact with so many of them before her healing. Makes us wonder how many may have already been exposed to COVID-19 and not know it. After his initial "glare" at the crowd and surroundings, Jesus' reaction was rather surprising. What flowed from him (his "power") earlier had healed her. A now, what flowed from her (her "truth") would bring forth Jesus' healing, confirming words: "Daughter, your faith has made you well!" There's your deep theological task for today—think on this story and what it might mean for our current situation. The desire for a cure at all costs and the realization that miracles can and do occur. For my scientific brain, this is one of those places where it comes into great conflict with my theological one. "Your faith has made you well".

During times of crisis, we hug each other—we crave that touch—the reassurance that another human being is there for us. In a time of crisis we need to feel that we are loved and what better way to feel this than a great big hug? So, now, in the time of Social Distancing and Self-Quarantine, we need to understand our basic human need to be touched in a new light. Our very human bodies crave and require the touch of another—and our souls need it even more. Let this be a time of creativity for us. A time to examine our old ways of thinking. Let us look at our physical bodies in a new

way. Let us ask questions of ourselves: do I shy away from touch? Do I abruptly end a hug with a loved one? Do I avoid situations where I might be touched? Look at those questions in your life and then use this time of forced separation to dream. To dream of the day, coming soon, where we will all gather again in this room and engage in one gigantic, celebratory embrace. Dream of the days of embrace to come—because they are coming and they will be joyful. Of this, I am certain.

Amen.

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