

The Importance of Touch

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Think about the act of touching; the caring, loving touches we have given and received in our lives – moments of connection between two people, or perhaps a group.

Until a couple of years ago, touch was integral to times of birth and as people died. Touch conveyed care. Until a couple of years ago, when “COVID” and “quarantine” came to be words used in everyday conversation, when a person was dying, a spiritual care person would be asked to come to the bedside. Sometimes heart wrenching moments, but many times they were beautiful moments – loved ones gather, often touching the one who is dying. The opportunity for touch, and connection, has been disrupted in our world with the pandemic. Perhaps this is an important opportunity to notice the value of touch when we feel so disconnected these days.

How many times in grief, in uncertainty, in stress, have family or dear friends held each other's hand, hugged. Touch connects us, literally, but also spiritually, and emotionally. Think beyond this pandemic to times when touch is taken away, like the painful moments when a relationship dissolves and two people begin to emotionally distance from one another.

As we cycle through distancing and quarantine measures, COVID ebbing and flowing, we have felt deprived of routine touches that were previously so important. The photo you see on the screen comes from an episode CBC Radio's *Ideas*¹ program. This episode focused on the importance of touch in the medical field. In it there is a discussion of the huge negative impact that COVID protocols have had on the ability of medical staff, nurses, personal support workers, doctors, as they try to help hospital patients and residents in long term care facilities.

We know it from hearing about it, but statistics tell the story. Front-line health-care workers working in close physical contact with patients are increasingly prone to "severe burnout," defined by the Ontario Science Table COVID-19 advisory board² as "emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and diminished professional achievement."

The October 2021 report states that prior to the pandemic, 20 per cent of nurses were experiencing "severe burnout." By spring 2021, more than 60 per cent of nurses were experiencing severe burnout. Video conference consultations instead of face-to-face, and having to wear masks, face guards don't help.

The photo shows Sasha Adler, a social worker specializing in dementia care, palliative care, long-term care and geriatrics, and Andrea Filip, a physician assistant, both of them working in a health team in Toronto. They share how important touch is to their work, and how difficult health care has become without touch.

¹ CBC Ideas." Loss of human touch: How pandemic isolation is taking another toll on health-care workers" January 17, 2022, found at <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/touch-deprivation-pandemic-isolation-health-care-workers-1.6315622>

² Ibid

We have heard the stories, it has been measured in research; we have felt more disconnected lately. Touch is important. One researcher points out that touch reinforces empathy, so, when we are not able to touch the people we serve, we lose that connection that feeds a sense of empathy.

Neuroscientists are only beginning to study the physiological factors of touch. One study distinguishes between social touch, that is, someone else touching us, and self touch, when we touch our own hand. Social touch activates significantly more areas of our brains than sensation when we touch ourselves.³

The University of Miami's School of Medicine conducted numerous studies showing how touch can accelerate recovery. One study showed that premature infants who were massaged three times a day for 15 minutes experienced greater weight gain, alertness and were able to be discharged from hospital an average of six days earlier than the infants in the control group.

Touch is important. We know it intuitively, but we are coming to understand it empirically too.

Now, today we have poor Thomas, dubbed the doubter. A negative connotation, doubting, for apparently needing to see and touch those nail holes in order to believe that Jesus was alive. Let us not forget that when Jesus first visited that locked room of terrified disciples, he offered *them* the opportunity to touch him.

John's Gospel circulated later than the other three Gospels. It was several generations after Jesus died and resurrected. This was a story told to people for whom feeling the touch of Jesus, hearing him, feeling his powerful presence, physically, was not possible. Blessed indeed are those who cannot see or touch Jesus, yet they – they trust in the power of Jesus.

Here we are, not just a few generations after Jesus, but two millennia later, yet we, each in our own unique way, worshipping online and worshipping physically in a sanctuary, we are seeking that Christ experience. We have lived through a pandemic that has changed us all. Though we might be told we can take off our masks, some of us, many of us, just don't feel comfortable or safe, yet. Fist pumps, elbow bumps, bows, and learning to smile with our eyes; we are trying so hard to compensate for the lack of touch.

Perhaps that is how we truly understand the context of this encounter between the disciples, Thomas and Jesus. Locked, isolated, fearful. It takes its toll on a person's emotional and spiritual well being. Grandparents yearning to hug the grandchildren. But then the family has to isolate because everyone has the new Omicron variant – it is heart wrenching not to be able to go to them, to offer comfort, a reassuring hug.

Touch is healing. Touch is important; perhaps we know that best In times when we feel most isolated. So, I'm wondering: When have you felt most isolated from touch in your life?

³ Ibid. Neuroscientist Rebecca Böhme, director of the Böhme Lab at Linköping University in Sweden, mentioned in this Ideas program.

For me, when my grandfather died, I was travelling. It was a difficult decision not to go home, I felt alone knowing that my family were coming together without me. I missed those little gestures, the knowing looks shared, the hugs.

Here I'm making a case for poor Thomas. Perhaps he truly doubted, or, perhaps in his grief, he just needed some reassurance that comes in a familiar touch. I think that we can all relate to that need. Restrictions are being relaxed, but we will need to continue being vigilant in following the directives of our medical authorities.

Was Thomas actually touching the wounds, or did he derive his inspiration and faith from the connection when Jesus invited him to touch? Perhaps it was the intimacy of that moment of encounter with Jesus – the touch physically, or at least spiritually.

Perhaps we need to find new, creative ways to touch one another in these isolating times we live in. It might be sending by mail or dropping off at the doors items that convey our love for one another. It has been muffin deliveries, waves, and distanced chats. It was the dollhouse adventures of Baby that Rhodine shared with people, and the special mid week Lenten services that Debby and Graham offered to keep us connected.

Many of you already know it, and *do offer touch* in creative new ways. Touch is important. How can we find ever more ways to meaningfully, touch and connect with one another in these disconnecting times? That is our quest on "Resurrection Road". Amen.