Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“Jesus, Master, have pity on us” (Luke 17:12)

Wis 6:1-11; Luke 17:11-19

In 1965, a love song titled ”I Hunger for Your Touch” by the Righteous Brothers, hit the charts with its simple lyrics about the intensity of young love. Unlike the raw and explicit messages of later popular songs, it captured for many teenagers the first innocent longing to reach out to take someone’s hand, to risk exploring the possibilities of a relationship. Falling in love is one of those key "before and after" moments that utterly changes us. We are no longer alone, fragmented and incomplete, because we are with someone who loves us, in touch with the wholenees only love can give. We come alive. This is why the commandment to love God and neighbor is the first and greatest commanment. We hunger for love because without love we begin to die..

The idea that touch is a kind of hunger, and that touching and being touched makes us human is affirmed by research on the importance of holding and massaging newborns to stimulate their development. In a powerful column in the New York Times, Sister Helen Prejean describes the need by prison inmates facing execution to have a pastor or chaplain of their choice with them in the death chamber so they will know human touch as they depart this world. The Supreme Court just cleared the way for Texas death row inmates to have this right. From birth to death, touch is the one hunger all of us experience and hope to have when we are welcomed and bid farewell from this life. A year and a half of Covid restrictions, masks, hand sanitizer and social distancing has shown all of us just how our mental health

depends on staying in touch with one another. How many parents, grandparents and other patients died alone in isolation from family and even healthcare workers?

When Jesus encountered the group of lepers asking for his help, we can imagine his own disciples stiffening and stepping back for fear of both contagion and ritual exclusion incurred from any contact with a loathsome and misunderstood disease. In most of the Gospel accounts of Jesus healing lepers he does not hesitate to reach out to touch them. In this case, he heals them from a distance and sends them to the priests to verify the miracle and allow them to return to the community. Only one, a Samaritan, returns to thank Jesus. He was a leper among lepers, twice scorned for being diseased and a foreigner. His encouter with Jesus restores him to his humanity.

We contrast Jesus' freedom to touch and be touched with the multiple ways our society has declared others untouchable, unclean and contagious. He embraced children, was wept over and anointed by women. He touched the sick and the dead, surrendered himself to the press of the crowds. They hungered for his touch, the very meaning of the Incarnation and the Eucharist, why these mysteries are the heart of our faith communities. We come alive when we are in communion with the Body of Christ.

And in the end, Jesus even chose to endure the abusive touch of those who tortured and crucified him. He embraced our sinfulness in order to renew the life of God in us, In this way he demonstrated what it means to be fully human, immersed in human vulnerability. We are right to hunger for his touch and to imitate him by responding to one another as the occasion arises

One of the most tragic self-inflicted wounds the church has suffered because of abuse crisis is that *all* priests, and so many teachers and caregivers, now fear touching anyone, depriving themselves and others of the full sacramental presence of the Jesus who embraced sinners and touched lepers. Like the lepers in today's Gospel, we call out, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!" Teach us the touch that gives life rather than takes it. Be with us always, for if we lose touch with you, we begin to die,

NOTE: This column, published on November10, suggested that the Supreme Court had already ruled on the right of inmates to have a spiritual support person in the death chamber when they are being executed. This case is still pending. I regret the error and pray for the imates this ruling will impact.

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