

Coming to Our Senses

Mark 5:24-34

(Jesus' disciples are shocked that Jesus feels the woman touch him,
when the whole crowd is pressing in on him.)

Preached October 9, 2011

Redlands First United Methodist Church

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What splendid gifts God gives us through our five senses! For us in Redlands to put our noses right up near one rose, then another, is a feast that can relax us and help us to enjoy sharing this planet with such fragrant beauty. On almost any walk around Redlands we can treat ourselves to this delight, for many months of the year.

When we were in Ohio, I went berserk during the short blooming session of lilac bushes. There was a cluster of about a dozen lilac bushes on the campus where I taught, so during those few weeks I couldn't keep my nose out of their blooms. I knew I must look odd, wandering from tree to tree inhaling, but it was an amazing delight, and truly relaxing. Their fragrance was one of the few things that could get me to slow down on my walk from building to building.

How satisfying it is to hear our choir, to hear the various voices interweave in patterns that make us marvel. We hear nuances that come from individuals or sections of the choir, yet the sound is of a whole. Thank you God for hearing.

In France a couple weeks ago my taste buds tingled with the flavors of ice cream. I tried five flavors, in the first five days, and then I quit my taste frenzy. I tried lavender ice cream, rose, of course hazelnut, and coconut, and also vanilla bean. It wasn't just sweets that tasted good. I was amazed at how many kinds of fish I enjoyed, too, most of which were cooked simply in a little olive oil. Thank God for taste buds.

I'm sure virtually all of us enjoy handshakes around here, and little hugs, and pats on the back. We manage to communicate welcome, openness. I love the sensation when I touch a ninety-eight year old's skin which is tissue paper thin... as it is incredibly soft, and wiggles under my hand. I love, too, the taught skin of little children, also soft, but with a tight stretch, and nice levels of fat underneath. Thank you God for touch.

Thanks to God for sight, so we could see the rain fall last Thursday, and on most days we can look with awe at the gorgeous mountains which surround us.

If any of our senses are thwarted, just think how marvelous it is that other senses step up to help us out. If we can't see, our hearing improves dramatically. If we have difficulty hearing, our visual cues and touch take up the slack. Thank you, God, for the cooperation of our senses together.

We can miss the enjoyment of the sight of rain, take for granted the rosebushes all over Redlands with their different rich fragrances, barely notice the touch of a handshake or precious wrinkled skin, think about our "to do" list instead of truly listening to our choir when they sing, and even manage to gulp down chocolate chip cookies without tasting them.

Spiritual Growth could entail our *conscious* decision to pay more attention to these avenues of beauty that our God-given five senses are for us. We could make a Spiritual Discipline: Be aware, be aware, smell, listen, savor, see, touch.

It seems a bit funny, really, to need to make a spiritual discipline of something which is such a gift. However, many things we consider “disciplines” are really gifts once we embrace them!

Like so many precious aspects of this good life, there is complexity even with regard to our senses. With our same five senses, we also take in aspects of life that do not seem so beautiful, don’t we? Some things we take in with our senses are even tragic.

When our eyes are attentive, we can notice a bruise on a friend and wonder what pain brought on those marks. When our ears pay attention, we *hear* the frustration and anger of those who are not appreciated in our culture or who are not granted the freedoms of most of us.

When our noses are paying a lot of attention we can smell pollution a little more. When our hands are willing, we can touch messy beds and fevering foreheads and trash left behind. Our noses and touch remind us that our bodies are not always fragrant and clean.

Spiritual Growth could entail our conscious decision to pay more attention to the pain that is brought to us through the avenues of our God-given five senses. Be aware, be aware, notice hurt, hear pain, see injustice and poverty.

Jesus seemed to pay attention.

We don’t have records of what Jesus said about *seeing* a gorgeous sunset or *tasting* delicious olives or grapes in his homeland. Yet, we have ample evidence of his sensitivity to human *touch*.

He paid attention to the woman who touched him; he felt her pain, and he felt his own power go out to her.

So many healings involve touch.

Jesus was on his way to heal the daughter of Jairus, a prominent Jewish man, so Jesus was immersed in a crowd of people who were pushing in on him and his disciples. One woman touched him on purpose. She had evidently premeditated her touch, had longed for the opportunity, had prayed to be healed of her 12-year long hemorrhaging. She believed that she could be healed if she touched even the garment of Jesus. And he felt it. He asked who touched him. She confessed, and he said, because of her faith, she was indeed healed.

Over the years I’ve had occasion to read three books that deal with touch and other senses in such insightful ways. I’m going to share their main ideas with you.

One book tells the history of touch, one recommends meditation upon one’s body, and the third book proposes a radical idea.

In the book, *Healing Touch: The Church’s Forgotten Language*, Zach Thomas describes how the Early Church congregants, in the first centuries, touched each other much more than we do. They anointed with oil. They served communion with each other more communally than we usually do. They laid hands upon each other mutually. They washed each others’ feet.

About 800 in the Common Era, Thomas writes, the “clergy began to feel more self-important, and there developed a hierarchical view of the world...” He calls that “power touch” because the laying on of hands was only from the perceived “higher” person to the perceived “lower” one. The scientific age brought on a “no touch” era in the church because, with more science came less appreciation for miracles and mysteries.

Science *sees* more than *touches*. The author also discusses how touch has gone wrong or become abusive at times.

As you consider your own history of touch, can you recall eras in your own journey? Songs remind us of the significance of “the first time we touched.” Parents of young children may love to hold their infants and sit with toddlers on their laps, but occasionally it’s a relief when a friend offers to hold the child. Then there’s the day when the parent rushes to hug their child after a ball game or when picking them up from Sunday School and the child says, “No, Mom,” or “No, Dad,” Don’t hug me, not in front of all these people.

We can recollect the pain of goodbye hugs, when you don’t know when you’ll see your friend or relative again. Imagine the hugs of those who watch their loved one go to military service. On our journey, too, are reunions, times when we’re back together with others, and we embrace with deep valuing.

The second book on touch that affected me is entitled *Meditating on our Body: Created in God’s Image*. It includes numerous ways we can meditate or appreciate various parts of our body. For example, one meditation is a “scar search,” in which we look at our various scars and recall the injury or surgery as we reflect upon the healing process that followed, and we thank God for the skin’s and organ’s healing.

Other meditations include rejoicing in a body part we treasure or visualizing Jesus’ touch on a body part we’re worried about. Or, we can consider a body part we’re not too excited about and find ways to appreciate even that.

The third book that spoke insightfully of touch is basically a theological book in which a portion is devoted to the five senses.

Have you ever thought about the *distance* required for each of the various senses? For example, we can SEE something that is quite far away. We HEAR something that is fairly distant, too. Usually in order to SMELL something, we need to be nearby. Yet, to TASTE something, we need to touch it. And TOUCH requires very closeness.

Theologian Sallie McFague suggests that we tend to consider *sight* as our primary sense. *Seeing* is safest; it allows us to stay at a distance. From an individual position, isolated from others, we SEE the world and even understand our place in the world. We tell children, whose natural tendency is to touch, “Look, but don’t touch.” **That’s sort of describes how we adults view reality.** This is McFague’s provocative proposal: **If we were to consider the world in terms of touch, then how would we experience ourselves in the scheme of things?** The experience would be quite different, wouldn’t it?

If touch was primary, we’d have to be more relational, less isolated. When Christine Smith, who does not see well, read Scriptures recently, someone held her arm to invite her to the pulpit. Then, she literally touched the page to read in Braille.

If touch were more dominant, that would even affect our experience of God.

Can you imagine Jesus asking the crowd, instead of “Who just touched me?” “Who just SAW me?” Of course not; the whole crowd saw him. Seeing is not very intimate.

Touch requires intimacy. If the woman managed to touch the garment that Jesus wore, she would have to be close to Jesus.

Think about this, too: More than any of the other 4 senses, touch requires volition, choice. We choose to reach out and touch someone. We do not choose to hear, see, or even to smell them.

Touch is riskier--we're more vulnerable.

Today we think of vulnerabilities through a raised consciousness of "good" touch or "bad" touch, but in ancient days, in the time of Jesus, there were other considerations of touch. This woman who was hemorrhaging was considered "unclean." Anyone who bled made those who touched them unclean too. *She should not have touched Jesus.* That's why she was risking her reputation AND JESUS' and the crowd's huge anger by making Jesus vulnerable.

We think of this passage as one of healing for the woman, but was it not also a healing for the crowd? Jesus once again, like he did numerous times, "reframed" what was the status quo. He *felt* honestly, *heard* genuinely, and he did not cast out the outcaste, but heard and loved her--she was healed, but so, too was the crowd healed of its prejudice that she would make Jesus unclean.

Jesus was touched by one who touched him. We are wise and drawn to be in touch with God and other humans.

What sense is involved with the telephone? Hearing, right? What a brilliant ad campaign then, for a telephone company to transform a telephone call into "Reaching out and touching..." We say we are "touched" *inside* by someone who calls us from far away. Actually now the slogan would be, "Reach out and text"—instead of hearing someone on the other end, we see the words of the other on our little screen!

God obviously created humankind with all of our senses. Our senses are part of the precious creation that is here for us to enjoy. So *when we come to our senses* and use them creatively, we are in touch with God. I bet that all of us can identify with the woman who touched Jesus' garment; we each seek some kind of healing and long to be made whole. May we all know deeply inside our core that God feels our reaching out and may we experience being inwardly touched by God's love.