

Reading: Matthew 9:9-13,18-26

One of the remarkable things about travelling in Washington DC is watching a presidential motorcade. It was Police Week when we were there and they kept practicing. The motorcade consists of 40 to 50 vehicles. In addition to the president, there are members of the press, security, officials, and VIPs. The most important people are in bomb proof limousines armed with every security device known to man and some that only women have thought of. There are several dummy limousines so that undesirables don't know which one the president is in. There is an ambulance, police cars, out riding motorcycles all with sirens blaring. There are armed snipers along the route, topped off with helicopters, and fighter jets on standby. All this to stop any undesirable getting even remotely close to the president. Watching one of these go by is, in equal parts, impressive and terrifying.

Contrast this with Jesus in the Gospel. Not only do undesirables get close to him but he goes out of his way to get close to them. He eats with tax collectors and sinners, he touches and heals a woman who is hemorrhaging, and even touches a dead girl. For the first century Jew this would have been very shocking.

To understand this passage, we need to put on the mindset of a first century Jew. A man was never to touch a child, a woman, or a sick person in public. And certainly, he was never to touch a dead person. Gentiles (non-Jews) were never to be spoken to, let alone touched and, if you saw and leper, you kept right away.

Nowhere is the mind-set of the Jew more obvious than in the temple. It was one of the wonders of the ancient world, and people came from around the Mediterranean world and Asia just to see it. Access to God was totally limited. The outermost courtyard was for the Gentiles, from which they could go no further in. The next courtyard was for Jewish women, and they could go no further than that. Another courtyard was only for men, but if they were handicapped, they could go no further. There was an area set aside for lepers which included those with eczema right up to real lepers. Only a circumcised, physically perfect man from the right tribe could become priest, and then they could only go into the Holy of Holies (the innermost area of the Temple and the place of the Presence of God) on one day of the year.

Jesus' entire public ministry challenged this system of limited access to God. With his body he redrew the map of access to God. He did this by choosing to talk to, touch, and heal Gentiles, both men and women. He talked to the woman accused of adultery and was touched by the woman with a flow of blood. Likewise, lepers, the dead, and those who had touched the dead had access to him. People with any number of physical and mental defects were not excluded from his presence. He even blessed children by touching them. If the temple code said that a person was unclean, it seemed that Jesus welcomed them as a matter of policy, and he touched them. Matthew, today's Gospel writer and our writer for this year, records how at Jesus' death the temple curtain was torn in two, symbolizing that limited access to God was gone forever.

It is into this context that we need to understand Jesus' touch in the Gospel.

But how can touch be so healing?

Some forty years ago next month, my father died. Preparing for this sermon I started to think about those who comforted me. Forty years later, I can't remember the words of one card that was sent to me, although lots were. I can't remember one thing someone said to me in comfort, although lots of things were said. I can't remember one prayer, one song or one sermon, although lots were shared, but I can tell you who hugged me, who held my hand, who put their arm around me.

Touch has this powerful way of reaching us, and even of healing. Of course, it can do the opposite too, if we are not careful. But if used well, touch has the power to heal.

Gary Chapman has given us the book *The Five Love Languages*. The five love languages describe five main ways people give and receive love. They are:

1. words of affirmation
2. acts of service
3. gifts
4. quality time
5. physical touch.

Often tension in relationships is because we are using different love languages. One partner is showering the other with gifts but the other just wants to spend time together. Or one is busy saying "I love you," but all the other person needs is a hug.

Jesus' life and ministry was totally dedicated to showing how much God loves us and he did it with all five 'love languages'. He expressed God's love through story and illustration, he did it with touch in healing and barrier breaking, he did it with acts of service like washing the disciples' feet, and he did with gifts, even giving his very self for the world.

But what of us? How are we expressing God's love to the world? Are we affirming others with words of kindness and encouragement? Are we showing God's love through acts of service? Are we giving of ourselves in gifts of love?

Two thousand years ago Jesus opened the way to God like never before. Is God in a motorcade of 50 cars surrounded by police? NO. Is God shut away behind a curtain, behind a wall, behind a gate, behind another gate and another wall. NO. God is present in Jesus Christ reaching out to us like never before. Do we need to be perfect or sinless or righteous or kind or ... NO. God in Jesus is unbridled love searching for you before you can search for him.

Jesus is unlimited access to God in all times and all places. Be sure of this: Jesus is reaching out to you in love right now. Not locked away in the temple or in a 50-car motorcade, Jesus is here for us, now, today, tomorrow and all our days.

*Let us pray:*

*Thank you loving God*

*that in Jesus you have broken down all the barriers that divide us from you  
and in him you have promised to be with us always.  
May we know your healing touch with us right now.  
May we feel the touch of your love, in that part of our life where we need it most,  
present with us now.  
Help us to know that we can come to you in any moment of our lives.  
For this good news we thank you,  
now and forever.*