As we all well know, human beings are sensory creatures; that is, we depend on our 5 senses to interact with the world and each other. In the natural physical world, these senses are all we have for navigating through this state of being we call “life.” Of course, we also have our brain to process all the data and our body to contain everything and move us around, but the senses are the “input data” that direct our movements and thoughts.

What remarkable things are the 5 senses. Sight is considered the most powerful, using over half of the brain, and it is incredibly sensitive. Hearing likewise is very sensitive, making sounds out of tiny vibrations. Taste we associate with our favorite foods, and our taste buds are able to discern many different flavors. And the magic of smell is that it is one of senses that can immediately transport you to another time – like smelling baking bread may put you in your mom’s or grandmother’s kitchen way back in time.

And then there is touch. To me, touch is the most mysterious of the senses. Many of the sensations we get from touching are not good – painful, even. Burns, cuts, bruises, joint pain of many kinds, and so on, are examples. The primary purpose for touch then, according to some, is to prevent us from hurting ourselves. But there is a deeper role for touch in our lives, and that is what we will be exploring today. First, a story.

A little girl was sitting on her granddad's lap while he read her a story. She kept taking her eyes of the book and reaching up and touching his old, wrinkled face.

After a few times doing this, she finally asked, "Grandpa, were you made by God?"  
  
"Yes, dear." he replied. "I was made by God a long time ago."  
  
The little girl paused for a moment and then asked, "And did God make me?"  
  
"Of course, dear." replied her grandfather. "God made you not long ago."  
  
The girl felt her own face and then her granddad's again, thought for a moment and then said, "God's getting better at it, isn't he?"

Yes, touch can be mysterious – the faces of an old man and a young child being so different can show us that. But like the other senses, we need touch in some unique ways, and that’s something Jesus knew very well..

**Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 NIV**

**The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. 31 Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." 32 So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. 33 But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. 34 When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things**.

We are back in Mark’s gospel and we see Jesus as a very busy man. You may remember from previous sermons I’ve given from this gospel that Mark emphasizes Jesus as a man of action. Prior to our passage, there was an incident where Jesus was in a large crowd and a woman who had suffered from hemorrhages for 12 years sought him out for healing. The woman merely touched the hem of Jesus’ cloak and she was healed. Then, Jesus raised a young girl from the dead by grasping her hand and saying “Talitha koum”, which means, “little girl, get up.” So, both the woman’s and the young girl’s healings were associated with touch. Jesus also sent out the apostles to preach to the people, to bring them the Good News.

We should notice also that some challenging situations had occurred for Jesus. He was rejected in his hometown of Nazareth, and his relative and herald John the Baptist was beheaded by King Herod.

Now, at the beginning of our scripture, Jesus and the 12 gathered and began to talk about all that had been happening. But such a crowd started forming that they were getting inundated, and they didn’t even have “a chance to eat”. If that phrase sounds familiar, you probably remember it from a few weeks ago when we were preaching from Mark 3, which was about Jesus and his family.

In our passage, Jesus wants to get the 12 to a place of rest, so they get on a boat to go to a deserted place. But the people found out where they were going, and were waiting for Jesus and the 12 when they came ashore. Jesus had compassion for them and began preaching to them.

Science and medicine have discovered fascinating things about the sense of touch in recent years. We now know that as soon as we’re born, we are closely coupled to the sense of touch. Skin-to-skin contact between mother and newborn provides a multitude of benefits – the baby may uptake nutrients faster, better regulate body temperature, improve brain development, experience less pain and more. Mothers, on the other hand, have a lower risk of postpartum depression and reduced stress. Studies show that fathers, too, can reap mental health benefits of skin-on-skin contact following birth.

For some health practitioners, this is old news. Quoted in “The Healing Power of Touch”, Kate Ramey, CRNP, a neonatal intensive care unit nurse practitioner in Pittsburg, says, “Nurses have always understood the magic of skin-to-skin contact between parent and baby.” Ramey and her fellow nurses encourage this intimate touch as soon as possible after birth and multiple times throughout the days following.

And the benefits of touch last far beyond childbirth, too. Throughout our lives, a whole range of bodily reactions happen when you touch another person, or they touch you — particularly when it moves the skin, says Tiffany M. Field, Ph.D., director of the [Touch Research Institute](http://pediatrics.med.miami.edu/touch-research/) at the University of Miami. When you do that, you’re stimulating pressure receptors and that in turn slows down the central nervous system by lowering the stress hormone cortisol.

Not only do the stress hormones like cortisol decrease, but levels of serotonin, the body’s natural antidepressant and pain killer, increase. And in addition to lowering cortisol and boosting serotonin, touch can also increase the hormone known as oxytocin, or the love hormone, according to Jena Lee, MD, director of the Pediatric Consultation Liaison and Pediatric Emergency Psychiatry and clinical instructor at UCLA. All of these impressive things originate from a simple touch.

The cortisol-lowering effect that a hug, massage or other form of touch can have on someone who is sick can also offer healing effects. “Cortisol, when up, increases blood pressure, heart rate, and inflammation — it can make healing harder, physically,” Lee says. “But when you decrease cortisol, heart rate can go down, blood pressure can go down, and the immune system is more able to do its function.” (From the-well.com /The Healing Power of Touch.) So there it is – hugs can make you healthier.

**53 When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. 54 As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. 55 They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. 56 And wherever he went-- into villages, towns or countryside-- they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.**

In this stage of Jesus’ ministry, he has become so well-known that people follow him around like a rock idol or a movie star would be today. Except it would have been done with even more intensity and poignancy, because we are talking about peoples’ lives here. These people were looking for physical healing and soul healing, and Jesus, with great compassion, offers them to the people, like a shepherd minding the sheep.

When we look at Jesus’ ministry, we note that not all of Jesus’ healings involve touch. For example, in healing the paralytic man who was brought to Jesus through the ceiling, Jesus simply tells the man to get up, take his mat and go home. Also, Jesus cured the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman from a distance (Mark 7). And there are other examples.

There has been speculation over the centuries about why Jesus usually but not always touched those whom he healed. A likely answer is that Jesus did some healings without touch to show that he was not healing by any magic spells or tricks – it was God’s power that did it. But when Jesus had the opportunity and it was appropriate, he touched them because he wanted to, out of compassion. He touched those, such as lepers, who longed for human contact, who wished to be restored to community with other people.

Today, we are coming out of a pandemic and its associated quarantines and other safety measures. Some of us have been deprived of touch during this time, and the huggers and hand-shakers among us have found that particularly hard. Even those who are not huggers and hand-shakers miss the personal contact of discussion and being present.

Here is a quote by Henri Nouwen, one of the greatest spiritual writers of the 20th century. “When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand.”

That’s what Jesus did, and that’s what we are called to do. By what ever means, when we touch each other, we heal each other. Let’s do it as best we can. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.