

When the stories of the priests' scandals were breaking in the news, a number of priests suggested that it would be best to withdraw as much as possible from the possibility of any physical contact. One pastor commented that children should never even be allowed to hug a priest. It was a pretty horrid time, but I rejected that reaction. My reasoning was that if we reject any physical contact, we are in effect allowing the grave sickness of certain priests to completely destroy the priesthood by withdrawing in isolation from the very people we are to minister to. There would be a rather shallow and distant life if such conditions existed.

The psychologist Dr. Charles Gerkin put it this way: *"No minister will ever get close to a person who he is unwilling to physically touch. If you are not willing to touch a homeless person, or an alcoholic, or a terribly dirty person, you psychologically are unwilling to minister to them."*

+A while back I was called the hospital to come and anoint a man who was in the final hours of his life. Before going into his room, there was a sign directing anyone that entered that they must first don a mask, rubber gloves and a gown (for our protection, not the patient) – I walked in looking like an astronaut, not a priest. The family was all there and none had this OSHA outfit. I was trying to anoint him through rubber gloves and finally said the heck with it – took everything off and anointed him. We then all took hands and began to pray and there was true healing in that room and it came through the power of human touch.

In Jesus' day, touching another human was much more regulated than any hospital – there were strict laws regarding who and what could or could not be touched. It was believed that touching the wrong persons and things would defile the one doing the touching and render him or her unclean.

According to ancient Jewish ritual law, the **woman suffering from hemorrhage** was in a state of impurity and any person who touched her or anything that had come in contact with her was instantly rendered impure (Leviticus 15:19-30). Holy people such as priests were forbidden **to touch dead bodies** or they would incur defilement (Leviticus 21:1-12).

Jesus would have none of this. Today's gospel, therefore, is not simply a story of Jesus' power to heal the sick and raise the dead. It is also a story of Jesus giving and restoring life by doing exactly what he was not supposed to do, namely, touching and letting him be touched by those whom the Law had declared unclean and untouchable. He took off the gown and rubber gloves of the law and brought life to those he touched.

Imagine that one of you is a business executive became depressed. Things have not gone well at work, and he was bringing his problems home with him every night. Every evening he would eat his dinner in silence, shutting out his wife and five-year-old daughter. Then he would go into the den and read the paper using the newspaper to wall his family out of his life.

After several nights of this, one evening his daughter took her little hand and pushed the newspaper down. She then jumped into her father's lap, wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him strongly. The father said abruptly, "Honey, you are hugging me to death!" *No*, in reality she is trying to hug him back to life.

+I think of the images of John Paul II patting the children on the cheeks or the image one little girl crying, hugging him – no words have to be spoken.

+Think of a loved one you may have lost to this life. Then someone comes and simply embraces you – no words need be said, for in that embrace comes back a little life that may have died.

Touching, like hugging and other forms of gentle contact, express love and acceptance of the other person in ways that words cannot. Touching in such a way however is a **two-way street**; it affects both the person touched and the person doing the touching.

The Menninger Institute in Topeka, Kansas once had a fascinating experiment. They identified a group of crib babies who did not cry. Let me explain. It seems that babies cry because they instinctively know that this is the way to get attention. Crying is their way of calling out. These babies, however, had been in abusive situations. Their parents let them cry for hours on end and never responded. Do you know what happened? The babies eventually quit crying. It is almost as if they had learned that it was not worth trying and had become listless.

So the Menninger Institute came in for an experiment. They got some people from retirement and from nursing homes, and every day these people held these babies and rocked them. The object was to get these babies to start crying again. And you know what, it worked. Physical touch had made the difference. However, in this study, who else received life? Those residents from the nursing home received life in giving life.

This was the greatness of Jesus. He took people where they were and hugged them to life. That is precisely what we see Jesus doing here in this dramatic passage in Mark 5. He is loving needy and hurting people, hugging them to life.

A religious leader was expected to dress in special attire and move through the crowds surrounded by a circle of disciples who would prevent anyone suspected to be unclean from touching him. This was not the case with Jesus, because everybody in the crowd had access to him. That is why when he turned and said, “**Who touched my clothes?**” the disciples answered with surprise, “**You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’**” (Mark 5:30-31).

Actually, **two kinds of touching are happening in the story**: the **touch of the crowd** which produces nothing and the **woman’s touch** which produces miracles. What is the difference between the many touches from the crowd and the one touch from the woman, which releases the power of Jesus? You are right if you say that the difference lies in the degree of expectant faith with which the touching is made. She is touching Jesus with all of her heart and soul and from this came a miracle.

Well, we again have the crowd gathered in this church. We also have Jesus, in which everyone here shall touch him. Some will be with the indifference of the crowd the pressed upon him, but perhaps for others will find life in touching Jesus with their entire soul saying, “*Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I will be healed.*”