THE LANGUAGES OF LOVE:
#4 – PHYSICAL TOUCH

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 8:1-3, 14-17; 9:18-26

“When Jesus entered Peter’s house, he saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever; he touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve him.”
(Matthew 8:14-15)

For the past few weeks we have been exploring the nature of love and, more specifically, the communication of love. The matter of how we communicate love has been explored for millennia in the literature of psychology, religion, and mythology as well as in poetry and literature. The therapist Gary Chapman has recently popularized this theme with a series of books on what he identifies as the primary love languages. I have simply taken this theme and attempted to ground it in the fundamental principles of our Christian faith.

The idea of a love language is a simple concept to grasp. We all grow up learning a language. We learn this primary language from our parents. It is reinforced through our interactions with our siblings and friends. It is then expanded and enriched through our encounters with teachers and educational materials when we go to school.

Somewhere along the line we learn that there are other languages – languages that, in their spoken and written form, do not sound or look anything like ours. Most of us can think back to a time when we first became aware of this and wondered about it. Why doesn’t everyone speak the language that we do?

This questioning of the origin and legitimacy of other languages is not limited to children. When our family returned to this country after having lived for a year in Germany, I remember at least three people who asked me what language the children spoke in the school that Corey and Jay attended.

I was initially puzzled by the question. I thought that perhaps they assumed that our children attended either international or English-speaking schools, though we had the money for neither. However, when I told them that Corey and Jay attended the public schools in the town where we lived, they simply repeated the question.
I told them that the children in the school spoke German. I distinctly remember these individuals, with a puzzled look on their faces, asking how the children had learned German.

I was dumbfounded. I explained that they had learned German at home growing up, just as our children learned English. These people apparently assumed that English was everyone’s primary language and that any other language had to be taught to children in some specific way. Ethnocentrism is apparently alive and well, at least in this country.

I grew up speaking English. Although my mother’s family was from Germany, they assimilated to the British culture of Nova Scotia following their emigration to Canada just before World War I. They spoke only English around the house so the children would learn English and be able to fit in with their peers. My mother never learned a word of German. As a consequence, the opportunity to be bicultural was never offered to me, nor was it offered to Darlene in relation to her Armenian heritage.

English is really the only language I know. I am quite honestly envious of people who are bilingual or multilingual. After having lived in Germany and attended school in the German section of Switzerland, I know a little German, but my grasp of German is elementary. It doesn’t come naturally. It doesn’t flow.

This is the way our love language works. We each have a primary love language, which we probably learned from our parents. The others do not come natural to us. This creates a problem within a relationship with a husband or wife, a parent or child, or with a friend. If I speak only English and you speak only Spanish, we have a problem. If we are to communicate on any but the most basic level, we need to learn each other’s language. This is also true of the languages of love.

The first week in this series we explored a verbal love language: words of affirmation, words of encouragement, words of praise. The second week we noted the importance of physical and emotional presence, spending quality time with the person whom we love. Last week we focused on concrete actions: doing things that are helpful to the other person. This week we will be exploring the importance of physical touch.

In his book *Games People Play*, Eric Berne, the founder of the psychological school of Transactional Analysis, has written about the groundbreaking studies of Rene Spitz with regard to the importance of physical touch. Spitz studied infants who were
cared for in German orphanages during World War II. The infants were kept clean, dry, and were well fed. However, since the staffing in the orphanages was short handed, the infants were seldom held. They were not hugged or kissed; they were not fondled or rocked. A startlingly high percentage of them died.

Autopsies revealed that the infants’ deaths had been caused by a problem with their spinal cord. Quite simply, their spinal cords had shriveled up. This alerted Spitz to the importance of physical touch to both our physical and emotional wellbeing.

The question I would raise is this: is it physical touch that is so important to our wellbeing, or is it love?

For an infant, physical touch is not only the primary way of experiencing love, it is the only way. Words of affirmation for a three-month old child mean little. Quality time, unless it is accompanied by physical touch, would not register. Even though a parent’s sacrifice of time and energy is a powerful expression of love, the expression of love through sacrifice does not register with the infant. The infant can only receive love on a sensate level. If the infant is not held or cuddled, does not have a lot of physical bodily contact with the mother in particular, the infant may not die but he/she may grow into adulthood with some serious psychological deficits.

Two people in a dating or marital relationship communicate their love physically by holding hands, hugging, and kissing as well as through sexual contact. A common problem in marriages is that the rich spectrum of physical expressions of love available to the couple may become distilled down to only one -- sexual intercourse. Even if physical touch is someone’s primary love language, this is generally not enough to meet their need, enough to make them feel truly loved.

For some people, physical touch is their primary love language. Without it they feel unloved. This is not only true of infants; it is also true of children. I have heard far too many adults in my counseling practice tell me that they weren’t sure that their father or mother loved them because they never remember being hugged, kissed, or even touched in an affectionate way. To most children, but especially for those for whom physical touch is their primary love language, this is an important communicator of love even into adulthood. A touch, even a simple touch, is a powerful expression of love to
such a child; a slap is absolutely devastating. In other words, I think we should hug our
grown children more often than we do.

If you are like me, you may not have grown up in a “touch-feely” family. Your
parents may have been light on the physical expression of their love for various reasons.
Some cultures, some ethnic groups express love in physical ways more than others.
There are cultural norms when it comes to the expression of love, appropriate and
inappropriate ways to touch members of the same or the opposite sex both within and
outside the family. For example, if you were in Japan on a business trip you might bow
to the executive from the other company. You probably wouldn’t say, “Hey there, good
buddy!” and give him a bear hug, at least not if you wanted to finalize the contract.

A person whose primary love language is physical touch would probably prefer to
watch television while sitting with his/her spouse on the same couch. A person for whom
this is not his/her primary love language would feel more comfortable sitting in another
chair. People who have abandonment issues from childhood tend to prefer closeness.
People with engulfment issues, who may have been swallowed up in a parent’s problems
during childhood, tend to prefer separateness. It is not that one of these is right and one is
wrong. What is important is to know your own style and also the style and the needs of
your partner.

For example, if your partner or your child is upset, what do you do? You might
express your love through your physical and emotional presence. You might express
your love through words of comfort. You might try to do something helpful. For some
people, however, what they want most is to be held; they want to be held while they cry.
For such a person comforting words, presence, and acts of service may mean little – right
then. What they want is the comforting reassurance of physical touch.

This is not true of everyone. If, while I am trying to fix the pipes under the sink
the wrench slips and I smash my hand on the pipe, I do not want to be held. I don’t want
someone to offer to be helpful by getting me a band aid or ice for my hand; I don’t need
anyone to say something kind or comforting; in fact, I don’t even want people to be
physically or emotionally present. My family has learned over time that when that
happens I want to be alone. So when I start to swear they scatter. When the swearing
stops, then they can offer me some ice and tell me they’re sorry that I hurt myself.
We have been talking about the power of touch as a communicator of care, compassion, affection, and love within the family, but this expression of love, like the others, extends far beyond the family. Have you even had someone just touch your arm or put a hand on your shoulder and you not only felt great, felt affirmed, comforted, and connected, you actually felt a jolt of electricity, a jolt of energy flow through you? I think we have all had this experience. I have felt it at times when I didn’t think I was hurting or that I needed the comforting reassurance of touch. But when the other person touched me, I felt it deeply.

There is a healing power to touch. I have had counselees, people well into their sixties or seventies, tell me that one of the best gifts they have ever given to themselves is the gift of a professional massage. Seldom, if ever, have they had anyone touch them that way, have they had anyone make them so aware of and so comfortable in their body.

The popular guideline for touch is that we need a minimum of five hugs a day for physical and mental health. Many of us do not come close to this in a week or even a month. Most of us stumble along ok without it, but what if physical touch happens to be your primary love language? You would feel the deficiency more acutely than someone from whom touch is not so important.

Jesus touched people. He touched the little children. He held them in his arms; he laid his hands upon them; he blessed them. Jesus probably knew how important physical touch is to children.

Many of Jesus’ healing miracles appear to have taken place without his touching the afflicted person. Some people were healed by what Jesus said to them. Some were even healed at a distance. But many of Jesus’ healings were either accompanied by touch or actually took place through the medium of touch.

As we heard in our scripture lesson this morning,

> When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.” Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

After the description of how Jesus cured the centurion’s servant at a distance, we read,
When Jesus entered Peter’s house, he saw Peter’s mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever; he touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to serve him.

Once again, as we heard this morning, a religious leader tells Jesus, “My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” Without a word, Jesus gets up and follows him.

On the way a woman who has suffered from hemorrhages for twelve years approaches Jesus, believing that if she could only touch the fringe of his cloak she would be healed. When she touches his garment, through this brief encounter with the healing power that flowed through Jesus, the woman is immediately healed.

Jesus then resumes his journey. When he arrives at the synagogue leader’s house he finds the little girl’s family and neighbors deep in their expressions of grief. Jesus says to them, “Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” The crowd laughs at him. When he mourners finally leave the house, Jesus approaches the little girl. According to Matthew, “he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up.”

There is no doubt that Jesus had what we might call the healing power of touch. His touch, the physical contact that took place between Jesus and the afflicted person, was enough to restore health and wholeness. It could even overcome the power of death. This is why we refer to Jesus as “the great physician.”

However, this power is not limited to Jesus. After Jesus heals a boy who has been possessed by a demon, his disciples ask him why they were not able to do so. Jesus tells them they were unable to heal the boy because of their little faith. He then says to them,

For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there, and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.

I think Jesus is saying that we, too, have the power to heal. We affirm this power when we engage in intercessory prayer. When we pray for those who are afflicted in body, mind, or soul, we affirm our deep connection with the person for whom we pray, our deep connection with the person in God and through the kingdom of God.

We also affirm this power when we reach out our hand to someone. When we touch someone, especially when we do so in a caring, compassionate and loving way, we affirm our deep connection with that person. A wonderful healing energy flows from us
to them or flows through us to them. It doesn’t matter whether touch is their primary love language; there are times when each of us has felt the healing, comforting power of physical touch.

With regard to us as a church, I don’t want us to go nuts about this. We don’t have to run around hugging everyone. We need to remember that we are basically a prim, proper, and stoic New England Congregational church and also that it is still technically flu season. We don’t have to get all touchy-feely, but I think we could “reach out and touch someone” a little more often than we do.

In the week to come, wherever we find ourselves, let’s just try to reach out and touch someone: husband or wife, child or parent or friend. If we do this, especially if our touch is accompanied by the expression of one or more of the other love languages, and if we do it with a feeling of caring, compassion, and love in our heart, we are helping to create a better, more loving world.

A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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