

Luke 1:39-45

The Touch of Christmas

Recognizing the touch of Jesus in our lives

The pediatricians finally believed something was wrong the day 2-year-old Julie Malloy placed her hands on a hot wood stove and left them there.

The toddler, with a head of pale blond hair, didn't flinch or jerk her hands away. She didn't shriek.

Her mother panicked.

Jackie Stitt and other family members rushed to Julie's side, pulling her hands from the iron. The soft, red skin resembled slabs of raw meat.

At the hospital, Stitt tried, again, to tell the doctors something wasn't right with her daughter. Julie would bump herself, cut a finger accidentally or fall down and react with apathy. No whimpers, no tears.

She seemed to have little instinct for self-preservation.

"One pediatrician (had) said she just has a high tolerance to pain," Stitt recalled.

It was more serious than that. Julie felt nothing.

Physicians ultimately diagnosed Julie, with a rare form of congenital insensitivity to pain.

She has no sensation of touch, temperature, deep pressure or vibrations in her limbs and parts of her chest and back.

She does have sensation in her head and portions of her trunk. Julie's motor nerves work correctly. She can move her arms and legs and turn her head at will.

The disorder is caused by a gene mutation that disrupts the development of sensory nerve fibers – those that carry sensations such as touch, pain, temperature to the brain.

For Julie, the condition is as frustrating as it is isolating. Of all the senses, the sense of touch is what grounds us in our daily lives and connects us to our surroundings.

Julie doesn't know the prick of dewy grass beneath the feet, the confidence of a firm handshake or the warmth of a Saturday morning snuggled beneath the covers.

Buttoning a shirt is impossible, typing is laborious, and walking requires attention to each step. She's literally out of touch with the world.¹

There is more to Julie's story as written by Melissa Burke when a community came together to raise funds to buy prosthetic finger tips for Julie who has lost the top segments of her fingers and thumbs due to infections from cuts. But her story illustrates just a little of what touch means for the safety and well being of a person.

Our sense of touch is more important than one might recognize. It is a protection. Our sense of touch can guide us when nothing else can. For those who are blind their sense of touch can help them navigate their way around. Even for yourself, think of how you feel around in a dark room in your house, and how you find your way around through touching walls, furniture, or other familiar items. Our sense of touch connects us to our world and to each other.

Each Sunday, our sharing a sign of peace does one thing that nothing else in worship does, it connects us physically through hugs and handshakes. There is no other moment in our worship that does that. It is a time of beauty. The choir has probably witnessed some pretty special moments as they look out over the congregation in this time of connecting.

In scripture we heard the story of Elizabeth the wife of the priest Zachariah and the daughter of a family of priests. Elizabeth was a godly woman, and a faithful follower of God. Her story is only told in the Gospel of Luke and if we were to go back to the beginning of her story we would learn that she was old and had never had a child. To not have a child in that culture was to be disgraced, for the purpose of a woman was to bear children for her husband. Please do not read into this time period our current position of a woman's value. Thankfully times have changed, still this was Elizabeth's reality.

But God intervened, and she became pregnant, and not just her, she learns that her cousin Mary is also pregnant. When Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, amazing things happened to Elizabeth. The baby in her womb leapt and she was filled with the Holy Spirit as was the baby that was in her - the baby who would grow to be John the Baptist. John would later baptize the Son of God.

It was at this moment when the baby leapt inside of her, that Elizabeth felt the touch of Jesus in her life.

How profound a moment that must have been for this old woman, to feel the movement of the life being created within her womb, and that this is brought on by the visit of Mary, the one who would give birth to Jesus.

¹By MELISSA NANN BURKE. Daily Record / Sunday News. <https://heartstohands.wordpress.com/about>. Accessed December 9, 2017

To be touched by Jesus...how profound a moment that can be in our own lives. This touch is not physical, though some may have experienced something that is so real that it is as if the weight of a hand has been placed on their head or shoulder even though no one is there.

But for most of us it comes through an experience that we have no other explanation for except that we somehow know that God was with us. The touch of Jesus often brings with it the sense of safety and well being, and the belief that we have value. Just as the hug our hand shake during the sign of peace signals that each person we greet has value, in our everyday living we have the opportunity to be the touch that Jesus extends to others.

Now many people are reaching out to help others, this is not just a thing Christians do, but the difference lies in the reason that we help and in the intention in our words and actions. To reach out to others, to show them that they are valuable, precious, is something Christians do because we believe that all people are made in the image of God and no matter what damage they have done to themselves, or others have inflicted upon them, they have intrinsic value because they are children of God. Our intention in reaching out to those who are hurting is that they should know that they are valuable and precious.

And it can be so difficult to remember that each person has that image of God deep within them when they lash out at us and we feel we don't deserve it. Or for some they have done so much damage to their body, mind, and soul that God in them is unrecognizable.

Sometimes it is difficult to see the image of God within ourselves and even comprehend that we are created by a God whose experience of love in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was so expansive that it overflowed into creation and the creation particularly of human beings.

The touch of God is not an easy thing to explain or define as each person experiences it differently. Some seem to know God intimately, for others it is only through their experiences with others, either in helping them, or being cared for themselves, that they get a sense of God's touch, of the touch of Jesus, in their lives.

As we ponder the birth of Jesus in this time of Advent, the following poem entitled *The Touch of the Master's Hand* written in 1921, may offer some helpful words and open a way to understanding the touch of Jesus. I leave you with these words as written by Myra Brooks Welch,

'Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer
Thought it scarcely worth his while
To waste much time on the old violin,
But held it up with a smile.
"What am I bidden, good folks," he cried,

"Who'll start the bidding for me?"
"A dollar, a dollar. Then two! Only two?
Two dollars, and who'll make it three?"

"Three dollars, once; three dollars, twice;
Going for three..." But no,
From the room, far back, a grey-haired man
Came forward and picked up the bow;
Then wiping the dust from the old violin,
And tightening the loosened strings,
He played a melody pure and sweet,
As a caroling angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer,
With a voice that was quiet and low,
Said: "What am I bid for the old violin?"
And he held it up with the bow.
"A thousand dollars, and who'll make it two?
Two thousand! And who'll make it three?
Three thousand, once; three thousand, twice,
And going and gone," said he.

The people cheered, but some of them cried,
"We do not quite understand.
What changed its worth?" Swift came the reply:
"The touch of the Master's hand."
And many a man with life out of tune,
And battered and scarred with sin,
Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd
Much like the old violin.

A "mess of pottage," a glass of wine,
A game — and he travels on.
He is "going" once, and "going" twice,
He's "going" and almost "gone."
But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd
Never can quite understand
The worth of a soul and the change that is wrought
By the touch of the Master's hand.²

² Myra Brooks Welch. The Touch of the Master's Hand. <https://allpoetry.com/The-Touch-of-the-Master%27s-Hand>. Accessed December 9, 2017.