

The Touch of Christmas

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.

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.

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

¹ Melissa Nann Burke. [Out of touch: A rare disorder affects woman's sense of touch, pain \(ydr.com\)](https://www.ydr.com/story/news/health/2023/11/16/rare-disorder-affects-woman-s-sense-of-touch-pain/7068282002/). Accessed December 8, 2023.

pain to protect one's self from harm, but there are all the little things that each day we get to experience because of our sense of touch.

Looking at the scripture reading, one of the beautiful moments in the story of Mary's visit to Elizabeth is "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb." (vv41). For parents spending those nine months waiting for a child to develop in the womb, a precious moment is when mom begins to feel the child moving around. It also hurts when the child decides to kick, but the joy of that movement which let's one know that life really growing is a cherished experience for mother and partner.

Elizabeth experienced the touch of the babe in her womb when Mary came to visit, that is shared with us, but we can know that Mary too felt her child over the course of those nine months of growth.

Touch is so important to our well-being generally. It helps us feel connected, appreciated, loved. Touch can also be painful, hurtful, damaging. In this story we trust that what is being experienced is the loving presence of God through the movement of the Holy Spirit. We read that "Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. (vv 41-44)

God's Spirit, God's promises came to two women who were the most unlikely of candidates for the job descriptions of mother of John and Baptist, a prophet of God, and Mother of Jesus, the Son of God. Mary a young woman, likely in her early teens, and Elizabeth an elderly woman long past her prime for child bearing. Mary, a yet to be married girl who could be stoned, and tossed aside for such an indiscretion as pregnancy before marriage, and Elizabeth a woman looked upon as unworthy because she was unable to provide a child for her husband.

These judgements seem harsh in our western culture given the independence and status women have gained in recent history, but we must remember that it is recent history. Not long ago, women did not have rights, and certainly elsewhere in the world that is still a concern. In the time of Mary and Elizabeth, their worth would have been in their standing as married women able to provide an heir for their husbands. They would have been considered more as possessions rather than valuable in their own right just because they lived and breathed.

It makes one wonder to whom Jesus might be born if God had sent him today. Would it be to a one of the homeless women in our encampments? We have this way of judging who has value based on their ability to provide for themselves and others. Not likely we would be looking for Jesus there. Yet throughout Jesus' life we know that he had a special place for those who were marginalized and outcast.

We like to think that Jesus is clean-cut, well-manicured, looking like one of us and my hope and belief is that through the Holy Spirit Jesus is present to us now in this moment

and each moment of our lives, touching our lives, bringing meaning and purpose to our lives. Still, given the Christmas story and the story of Jesus life and death, one cannot walk away without understanding that God is with those who seem unworthy, who appear to live unholy lives.

Recently I was introduced to a man on our fire escape at the church who asked me if I had a Bible that I could give him. There were actually two men that day that each received a small Bible with the New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs. For those of you old enough to remember the times when the Canadian Bible Society gave Bibles to children in elementary school, well that is the kind of Bible these two gentlemen received.

Since that time one of the men, who still frequents here has asked me to explain a passage to him as I was getting into my car to leave. On another occasion he shared part of his story with me and I have learned that he has cancer. He has also told me that he loves me, that I am an angel, and he has blessed me. I can tell you that each time I encounter him I feel like I need to pay attention because Jesus is with us. Jesus is with him; a person one might think is the least likely place for me to find the blessing of God. Yet every encounter I feel more and more that God is present.

In the coming days, consider how God has touched your life. Where have you seen and known God present with you or in another? Consider how God might be calling you to touch the lives of others in ways that share the hope, peace, joy, love, and compassionate justice of God in a world that so desperately needs to know that God is present.

To close, let me share the poem "The Touch of the Master's Hand" sometime called "The Old Violin" written in 1921 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

May the touch of the Master's hand guide you as you live and move and have your
being in the world. Amen.

² [The Touch of the Master's Hand by Myra Brooks Welch - Famous poems, famous poets. - All Poetry.](#)
Accessed December 8, 2023