

1

As children, we learn that there are certain things we can touch and other things to avoid touching, such as when walking through a fancy store with lots of pretty glass objects on the shelves. “Don’t touch,” we’re warned, for no parent wants to pay for a delicate item dropped on the floor that shatters into countless pieces.

When my son was young, I tried to teach him not to touch hot objects, such as the oven and stove. “Ouch,” I would say, “Hot. Don’t touch.” Although he was young, he was curious, and one day he reached out to touch something hot, and when his scream pierced the air and tears flooded his eyes, I knew he had discovered that the words “hot” and “don’t touch” were important words to learn and follow.

Through the years I’ve learned not to touch plants with three leaves shaped somewhat like a mitten, for the poison ivy leaves can create blisters and red itchy areas all over my skin.

During the past year of the pandemic, we’ve been warned not to touch our faces or other people, and if we’re unsure about any potentially infected surfaces, we have been told to wash our hands and use sanitizer. Although that advice is probably good even without a pandemic, we also heard advice about avoiding hugs, and

I think that’s been the hardest part of this past year for many of us. Someone recently asked me, “The thing I miss the most about church is seeing my friends and giving them hugs. When will hugs be ok again?”

In a recent issue of *Time* magazine, one writer expressed her loss of hugs this past year:

I’ve missed the satisfying hugs you share with friends you haven’t seen in a while, the quick hugs you exchange with frequent companions when you sit down for coffee, the long hug you might give a favorite relative before you part ways.

Most of all, I am haunted by the hugs I’ll never get to give my mother, who died of cancer early in the pandemic. I have a lifetime of her love and affection to remember. I know the exact day we must have hugged for the last time, weeks before COVID-19 forced shutdowns and stay-at-home orders throughout the country. But I don’t remember our final hug itself—how long we held on, or how tight, or her exact words before I left for the airport—because I thought I’d be back soon. I didn’t know it was the last time I would ever see her.¹

Sometimes we don’t realize the value of a connection until it’s gone, and this past year we’ve realized the value of hugs. Studies have shown the importance of hugs, from reducing stress to protecting

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us from illness and reducing our blood pressure.² For those who live alone, hugs may be the only form of physical contact they receive during a week, and when we take those away, some have found the psychological effects unbearable.

Sometimes it's important to reach out and touch, which the unnamed woman in Mark's Gospel discovered while searching for healing. Before she could receive healing, however, she had to interrupt Jesus' plan to help the daughter of Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He requested of Jesus, "Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live." Jairus knew the importance of touch, that somehow this contact from Jesus could bring healing. Before Jesus arrived at his house, however, the unnamed woman reached out first. One commentary explained her situation:

Mark tells us the woman has been suffering from "hemorrhages" — or what some other translations call "a flow of blood" — for all those many years. What he means is that her monthly period is continuous. The flow of blood never ceases.

Orthodox Jewish communities in Jesus' time contained a building called a *mikveh*, or ritual bath. During their time of the month, women of the community lived in semi-

seclusion. Their physical relationship with their husbands was suspended. They were considered ritually unclean, according to the law of Moses. At the end of that time, they went down to the *mikveh*, bathed, and were declared clean again.

This woman, because of her unusual medical condition, has dwelt in the unclean state for a dozen years. That means she's a virtual outcast from the community.³

Can you imagine being an outcast for 12 years, of being cut off from your friends and family? It's more than missing hugs for a year during a pandemic, it's the total loss of connection to anyone for 12 years! She had gone to lots of doctors, had spent all her money, and now she had no options. In the midst of her feelings of loss, she tried something risky. She entered a crowded area, a place with lots of people gathered around Jesus while he was on his way to help a religious leader's daughter. She reached out and touched, and Jesus knew something had happened, for he asked, "Who touched my clothes?"

The disciples thought this was a strange question, for in a crowd, with people jostling around, how could anyone figure out who touched him? And what was the big deal, anyway, if someone bumps into Jesus?

3

Jesus knew this touch was different, for he had felt a connection, an energy, a reaching out for help. In our weekly prayer group gathered on Zoom, we recently



looked at a piece of art depicting this scene painted by Daniel Cariola, a large painting hanging behind the altar at the Encounter Chapel in the Holy Land.⁴ The artist illustrated the touch with a

glow of light, representing the energy flowing from Jesus to the woman.

When the woman discovered her plan had been detected, she confessed and told Jesus everything. Rather than rebuking her, which the disciples may have expected, Jesus replied, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.” The Greek word *εἰρήνη* (i·ray·nay) translated as “peace,” can mean “security, safety, prosperity.” Isn’t that something we all

long for? A safe place? Wellbeing? Having enough? This unnamed woman desired for more than physical healing, for she longed to be reconnected to her social connections, something we have in common with her, for we also have longed to be back together again.

Yes, livestream at CCC and radio at FCC have helped us reach out in an electronic way this past year, but I think we’ve all begun to discover that we miss something—the energy that flows between us when we’re gathered in this place. It’s more than just hugs, it’s the feeling of being included in the body of Christ in some tangible way. Seeing one another, hearing the music, and offering an amen after a moving experience in worship brings us healing, just as the woman discovered as she reached out to touch Jesus. May you experience the risen Christ as you reach out and touch and sense the Spirit’s presence among us.

¹ Nicole Chung, “I’m Grateful for the Hugs I Can Now Share—and Haunted by the Ones I Can’t,” JUNE 24, 2021, <https://time.com/6075422/hugs-after-covid-19-pandemic/>

² www.healthline.com/health/hugging-benefits

³ “A Touching Tale, June 27, 2021, www.homileticonline.com.

⁴ www.christian.art/daily-gospel-reading/105