TITLE: 06 Touching the Untouchables

TEASE: Would you hug someone with AIDS? How about a dirty child with maggots in her eyes? There are some people that it is difficult to touch. Let’s explore about that today here on Windows of Hope. I hope you’ll join us.

SERMON

Have you ever heard the expression, “I wouldn’t touch that with a forty-foot pole”? Maybe that saying isn’t used as much today as it once was. It indicates the distaste you feel for something you absolutely do not want to get involved in – whether it’s literal, like a mess you refuse to clean up, or metaphorical, like a situation at the office from which you want to keep your distance. You can just imagine yourself gingerly approaching the offending problem with your forty-foot pole in hand – even that’s not enough to keep you away from it.

Are there people you wouldn’t touch with a forty-foot pole? We don’t want to admit it, but most of us probably have a secret list of people like that. People whose problems, whose situations are so messy, or unappealing, or toxic that we simply don’t want to get involved. Don’t want to get dragged into it. A woman once said of one of her neighbors, “I never want to say ‘how are you?’ when we meet – because I know she’s going to tell me exactly how she is, and I don’t want to hear it!”

Most of us have heard of the caste system that formed the basis for India’s social structure for centuries. At the very bottom, the lowest caste of all, were a group of people known as “untouchables.” These people were often associated with jobs that were ritually impure, such as butchering and removing human waste. They were segregated from full participation in social and religious life, and their lives were often no better than those of slaves.

During the years when Mohandas Gandhi was an influential leader in India, one of his controversial moves was to try to improve the lives of the untouchables. Gandhi referred to the untouchables as “Harijan” – children of God. His willingness to see those whom society considered untouchable as valuable people – in fact, his willingness to touch the untouchables – was one of the reasons that Gandhi remains a hero to so many people today, long after his death.

But Gandhi was by no means the first person to break through the barriers human beings set up between themselves. Others throughout history have reached out across those barriers, to touch the untouchable, to love the unlovable, to help those whom most people view as being beyond help.

One of those who reached out in the most striking way, of course, was Jesus Himself. Jesus’ kindness to others was evident in His treatment of the poor, the sick, and those who were not accepted as equals in the rest of society – women, children, foreigners, and those identified as sinners.

One of the clearest examples of Jesus’ kindness to the “untouchables” in His society was evidenced in how He treated those with leprosy. In biblical times, the skin disease known as “leprosy” was so dreaded and feared for its contagion that there were very explicit and detailed regulations for how lepers were to be separated from the rest of society. Their disease had to be diagnosed and identified by a priest, and they had to be excluded from the company of others.
Lepers usually lived together in groups, since they were unable to work or to live with their families. They were on the outer fringes of society, the most untouchable of all. And since, in the world of ancient Israel, disease was associated with sin in most people’s minds, lepers were morally as well as physically unclean. In order to be stricken with such a dreaded disease, most people thought, they must have committed some particularly horrible sin in the eyes of God.

Let’s take a look at two biblical stories about Jesus encountering people with leprosy. The first is found in Matthew 8, verses 2 and 3:

“A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, ‘Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean.’

“Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. ‘I am willing,’ he said. ‘Be clean!’ Immediately he was cured of his leprosy.”

It’s interesting to see how this man approached Jesus. He obviously knew of Jesus’ power to heal the sick. He had faith, for he said that he knew Jesus could make him clean. The part he doubted was whether Jesus would actually want to heal him. “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” The man thought, perhaps, that Jesus would not be willing. Why would He use His power on behalf of a leper, an outcast, a sinner? Why would He even want to contaminate Himself with the presence of such a person?

But Jesus surprised the leper – and, no doubt, surprised the other people watching. Not only was Jesus willing to heal; He reached out and touched the man. He touched the untouchable.

How long had it been, I wonder, since that leper had felt the simple, kindly touch of another human being? Perhaps once he had known the healing power of touch – the loving arms of his parents when he was a child, the tender embrace of his wife, the warmth of his own children cuddled in his arms, a friend’s arm around his shoulders. But from the moment he was diagnosed with leprosy, those touches were denied to him. Now he spent his life shying away from human touch, warning people before he approached that he was unclean.

Then Jesus reached out and touched him. Jesus reached past all the barriers that culture, society and even religion had placed around this man, as if they weren’t there. Jesus touched the leper as a human being. Perhaps the simple warmth of that touch did just as much for the man as any miraculous healing power.

Jesus didn’t have to touch people in order to heal them. There are many examples in the Gospels where Jesus healed people with just a word – even at a distance! So why did Jesus choose to touch the leper if He didn’t have to? It was because He didn’t have to – because nobody expected Him to. Jesus touched the leper because no one else would.

On another occasion, Jesus met a group of lepers. We read about this encounter in Luke 17, verses 11 through 16:

“Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called
out in a loud voice, ‘Jesus, Master, have pity on us!’ When he saw them, he said, ‘Go, show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.”

That man – the one who came back to thank Jesus – was doubly an outcast. He was not just a leper, but a Samaritan leper. Samaritans were regarded by Jews as unclean anyway, so take a Samaritan with added leprosy – it would be hard to imagine a more unclean, unacceptable, untouchable person in the eyes of Jesus’ contemporaries.

Yet Jesus healed the man. Jesus treated him – and his fellow lepers– as human beings, not untouchables. Even though nine of them did not say thank you! They were no longer outside of the community, rejected and untouched by everyone. Jesus included them, brought them in, made them whole in more than just the physical sense.

When we talk about “kindness” we often think first of those nearest to us – our families and friends. And indeed, it is important to show kindness in these intimate relationships. But to show kindness as Jesus did requires more. It requires that we move outside our circles of comfort and familiarity, to reach out and touch those we consider untouchable, unlovable.

We may not live in ancient Israel, where lepers were forced to live outside the city walls. We may not live in India in the days of a rigid caste system where some people are written off as untouchables. But just as surely as the people in those places did, we have people in our societies that are considered untouchables. It may be the criminals, the addicts, the AIDS patients. In some communities it may be the new immigrant, or the severely disabled person. It may be the elderly person spending his or her twilight years alone in a nursing home, or the homeless man on the street.

We all have our own private lists, too – not just of those our society considers untouchable, but of the people we personally don’t want to come close to. The obnoxious neighbor, the co-worker who cheated us once and whom we’ve never trusted since. Or perhaps the person at church who frightens us because they are so needy that we fear getting too involved with them. All around us are untouchables, people desperate for a human touch, human kindness.

In thinking of Jesus as He walked on earth, I’m struck by how He reached out and touched people – like the lepers. How often the Bible mentions His touch – even though, as we’ve seen, He had the power to heal without physically touching a person. The touch of kindness was important in and of itself – because Jesus came to earth to show us what God is like, and our God is a God willing to touch the untouchables, to show kindness to everyone.

But now that Jesus is no longer physically present here on this earth, how does He touch people? The answer is so beautifully expressed in the words of the sixteenth-century spiritual writer, Teresa of Avila:

“Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
Christ has no body now but yours.”

Indeed, we are to be His hands and His feet – the only tangible way He has now of showing His compassionate love and kindness to everyone, including the untouchables. The words of Matthew 25, verse 40 should be ringing in our ears:

“I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

Is there someone that needs your touch today? How about that neighbor that can’t shovel their driveway anymore? What about the single mother that could use a little respite? Maybe you know some children that need a father figure. Can you give them a hug or play a game of catch with them? Perhaps you are aware of an injured veteran that is disfigured because of burns. He might be afraid of what people will think and so he shuts himself inside his home. Why not go play a game of Scrabble or dominoes with him and tell him how much you appreciate what he did for your country.

Jesus reaches out to touch each of us in love and kindness. And He invites you to share that loving touch with others, through simple acts of kindness to everyone – even the untouchables.

It may be a little uncomfortable at first. We may not like getting out of our routine and our comfort zones. We may even worry about what our friends will think if they see us touching someone that we consider “unclean”. But if Jesus, the King of the Universe could reach out and touch a man with leprosy, can we do any less?

Once we commit ourselves to loving others as Jesus loves them, we will find life so much more fulfilling. We will truly experience the joy of Jesus.

Will you join me now as we pray?

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, we thank You for that gentle touch of love and kindness that You showed even to the outcast and rejected while You were here on earth. Thank You that You haven’t changed, that You still reach out in love and acceptance to everyone. Help us to share that same love with others, in Your Name we pray, Amen.