

OK, here's my nod to Valentine's Day – and WORLD MARRIAGE DAY. I must say I always get a kick out of watching the guys at the check-out in Harris-Teeter on this day. They all have flowers, a just-picked-out card, a bottle of wine or 6 pack of beer, and maybe some food. But JUST IN CASE, this is a list of how to tell if "YOU FORGOT VALENTINE'S DAY!"

1. Hallmark calls, offering discounts on apology cards.
2. The kids tell you that Mom 'went to bed early' And 'locked the door'while you were taking out the trash.
3. You wake up with a florist's ad stapled to your forehead.

I hope you all remembered!

First, some background on the gospel. The instructions for lepers in the first reading we just heard from Leviticus give us an idea of how miserable their life truly was. They had to live alone; they had to live outside of town. They couldn't work, worship, or be with their family or friends. Hmmm...sounds a bit like COVID! They were left to face their ever deteriorating future in excruciating isolation. They had to beg for their livelihood in a society that believed them to being justly punished for some sin they had committed. The deepest pain of leprosy was the growing realization that no one cared about them.

This inner world is revealed in the leper's request. He has heard of Jesus' power to heal. More importantly, he has heard that Jesus cares about those whom no one else cares about. Jesus includes the excluded. This reputation of Jesus emboldens the leper to come forward. He does not keep his distance. His faith is that Jesus has the power to make him clean. His hesitancy is that Jesus might not be disposed to do it. The leper's self-image is that he is beyond human and divine concern. His uncleanness means that people – and even God, they thought -- remove themselves from him. However, Jesus' inner compassion for this isolated human being moves Him to reach out and touch him, symbolically welcoming him back into the circle of human life. The cleansing reveals God's outreach to the outcasts even more than it celebrates divine power to cure a physical illness.

Jesus gave the leper what he requested. The leper does NOT return the favor. Jesus' compassionate outreach was intended, at least in part, to restore the leper to community. So Jesus commands him to show himself to the priests and make ritual offerings (see Lev 14). This is the legal way back into the community. The story does not tell us whether he obeyed this command. But it does tell us he disobeyed the command to say nothing to anyone.

In fact, he told everyone everything. The ironic result is that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly. Having touched the leper, He falls under the Leviticus sentence of exclusion. Which means that Jesus is now unclean. The cleansed leper can now enter the town, but the ONE who cleansed him must keep His distance. This is the social consequence of the cleansed leper's 'freely proclaiming it.' But whether Jesus is in the town or country, people find Him. What He is saying and doing are what people want to hear and see.

There may also be a mystical hint in Jesus' sudden leper status, in THE HOLY ONE becoming unholy. It is captured in a poem by John Shea called A PRAYER TO THE PAIN OF JESUS:

When crutches were thrown away/ did Jesus limp/ after the running cripples?

Did His eyes dim/ when Bartimaeus saw?

Did life ebb in Him/ when it flowed in Lazarus?

When lepers leapt in new flesh,/ did scales/ appear/ on the back of His hand?

The gospels say/ Jesus felt power to go out from Him/ but neglect to say/ whether at that moment/ pain came in.

Did the Son of God/ take on ungrown legs and dead eyes/ in the terrifying knowledge/ that pain does not go away/ only moves on? (THE HOUR OF THE UNEXPECTED, 1992)

Which brings me to my second point, touch. The American mystic Andre Dubus wrote “Without touch, God is a monologue, an idea, a philosophy. God must touch and be touched....in the instant of the touch there is no place for thinking, for talking; the silent touch affirms all that, and goes deeper: it affirms the mysteries of love and mortality.” (quoted by Brian Doyle in THE WET ENGINE, p. 53)

Beneath all language, touch is the common gesture, the energy that connects all that lives inside us with all that lives outside us. I’m currently reading a book on JOY that contains the conversations of a meeting between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu that occurred last year. I was struck by how many pictures – and vignettes – from the book, show and describe them touching one another, tenderly, playfully, warmly. They have shared a deep friendship for many years, come from completely different backgrounds, races, countries, languages, religions. You may realize that as a Buddhist, the Dalai Lama is a humanist – not a believer in God. And of course, Archbishop Tutu is a devout leader in the Anglican Church. But that simple, human touch is evident over and over throughout the book.

We can disagree – be Christian or Muslim or Jewish or Buddhist, be conservative or liberal, corporate-city or farm-rural, and all the walls created by what we think – will crumble with the gentle reach of a compassionate hand.

Often we are afraid to let others in, afraid of being hurt, and sometimes, once knowing the salve of being touched, we seek that comfort for pains we can only heal ourselves. The need to be touched is never in question, anymore than we question the need to breathe. Mark Nepo told of his grandmother, dying at 94. He felt crippled at heart because she had reverted to speaking the Russian of her childhood, and he feared they would not be able to understand each other. But an old friend counseled him “You both can understand touch.” With that, he stroked her face and arms in silence and she rubbed his wrists, and even when she couldn’t open her eye or speak any longer, they had a language of comfort that carried them to the moment of her death.

Sometimes the heart works best in touch. (adapted from Mark Nepo, THE BOOK OF AWAKENING, p. 232) Our skin hungers for touch. It appears that touch gets ‘under our skin’ and makes its way to our hearts. It tells us that we are not alone. It assures us that we are loved. The Greek word for touch can also be translated ‘to kindle’ or ‘to light.’ Touch. It kindles a fire in our flesh and puts a light in our eyes. It warms us to the core. It keeps us alive. Perhaps the most important thing that Jesus did for the leper was to reach out and touch him, even beyond what happened with the healing.

Third, this leads us to what happens when human touch is applied correctly. When we see Jesus reaching out to the leper, when we see Him touching the untouchable, when we see Him assuming the leper’s defilement and becoming as a leper Himself, what we are witnessing is an event laden with the mystery of the

atonement. For in this act of compassion – whereby the leper is cleansed but only as Jesus is made unclean – we may catch a glimpse of how Jesus changes place with us. We witness His COMPASSION. And compassion makes us ONE.

This drive toward a common beat of the human heart is the force beneath compassion. It is what makes strangers talk to strangers, despite the discomfort. It is how we risk new knowledge. For being still enough, long enough, next to anything living, we find a way to sing the one, voiceless song of humankind.

Yet we often tire by fighting how our hearts want to join, seldom realizing that both strength and peace come from our hearts beating in unison with all that is alive. It feels incredibly uplifting that without even knowing each other, there exists a common beat between all hearts, just waiting to be felt.

It brings to mind the time that the great poet Pablo Neruda, near the end of his life, stopped while traveling at the Lota coal mine in rural Chile. He stood there stunned, as a miner, rough and blackened by his work inside the earth, strode straight for Neruda, embraced him, and said, “I have known you a long time, my brother.”

This touches the deep truth that every time we dare to voice what beats within, we invite some other cell of heart to find what lives between us and sing. (adapted from Nepo, THE BOOK OF AWARENESS, p. 40-41)

A story to conclude. In India, there is a story about a kind, quiet man who would pray in the Ganges River every morning. One day, after praying, he saw a poisonous spider struggling in the water and cupped his hands to carry it ashore. As he placed the spider on the ground, it stung him. Unknowingly, his prayers for the world diluted the poison.

The next day the same thing happened. On the third day, the kind man was knee deep in the river, and, sure enough, there was the spider, frantic in the water. As the man went to lift the creature yet again, the spider said, “Why do you keep rescuing me? Can’t you see that I will sting you every time, because that is what I do.” And the kind man cupped his hands about the spider, replying, “Because that is what I do.”

There are many reasons to be kind, to be compassionate, but perhaps none is as compelling as the spiritual fact that is what we do. It is how the inner organ of the heart keeps pumping. Spiders sting. Wolves howl. Ants build small hills. And human beings lift each other, no matter the consequences. Even when other beings sting.

Some say this makes us a sorry lot that never learns, but to the follower of Christ, it holds the same beauty as berries breaking through ice and snow every spring. It is what quietly feeds the world. After all, the berries do not have any sense of purpose or charity. They are not altruistic or self-sacrificing. They simply grow to be delicious and feed other creatures – because that is what they do.

As for us, if things fall, we will reach out to catch them. If things break, we will try to soothe them – because that is what we do as Christians. We have all reached out, and sometimes it has felt like a mistake. Sometimes, like that quiet man lifting the spider, we have been stung. But it doesn’t matter, because that is what we do. That is what we do. It is the reaching out that is more important than the sting. In truth, we recognize in our heart of hearts, we’d rather be fooled than not believe. We’d rather be stung than not try to help. (adapted from Nepo, THE BOOK OF AWAKENING, p. 20-21) To which we say AMEN, AMEN, AMEN.