

# TO TOUCH AS JESUS TOUCHED

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Mark 1:40-45

February 15, 2009

**He was despised and rejected by men;  
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;  
and as one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised,  
and we esteemed him not.**

**Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;  
yet we esteemed him stricken,  
smitten by God, and afflicted.**

**But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
he was bruised for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,  
and with his stripes we are healed.**

**All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have turned every one to his own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.**

A certain pastor and his wife, who shall remain nameless, of course, loved to plant flowers and ferns and tender little sprouts of things and watch them grow and bud and blossom in the Spring. But it was cold that spring. And one day the temperature started dropping fast, so the preacher's wife went out and brought all the potted plants inside so they wouldn't freeze or catch cold, I suppose. And it turned out that a little green garden snake had taken up residence in one of the pots. And when it warmed up, it slithered out of the pot and onto the carpet. And the poor woman saw it slither and slide right under the living room couch. And she jumped up and let out a scream that would have curled your toenails!

And her husband, the Preacher, who was in the shower, ran out into the living room wearing the same thing he was wearing the day he was born -- naked as a jaybird, mind you. Because ... well he thought someone was dying. And his wife was hysterical. Jumping up and down, pointing at the couch. "Snake!" she screamed. "Snake! There's a snake under the couch!" And with that, the naked man dropped to his hands and knees to look for it. Pit his face right down on the floor to see if he could see the serpent slithering around under there.

And about that time, Ralph the family Basset Hound walked up behind him and touched his cold nose to the naked man's thigh. And the poor man thought the snake had struck his hinder parts and he fainted dead away in the living room floor. His poor wife thought he'd had a heart attack, so she rushed to the phone, dialed 9-1-1, and told them her husband was in mortal danger. And in two shakes of a lamb's tail, the paramedics arrived at the parsonage. And they covered the naked man with a sheet or something, loaded him onto the stretcher, and started carrying him towards the door. And just then, the snake reappeared from under the couch and crawled right over the foot of one of the paramedics. And when he looked down and saw the serpent on his foot, it scared him so badly that he dropped his end of the stretcher. That's when the poor, naked preacher broke his leg and ended up in traction at the hospital.

Well ... his poor wife was still stuck with a snake in her house. So she called on one of the neighbors. And, brave soul that he was, he volunteered to capture the snake. (He was probably one of my relatives from South Eastern Kentucky, where they do this sort of thing religiously.) He armed himself with a rolled up newspaper, got down in the floor, and started poking under the couch. But after bit, he decided the thing wasn't there and had gone out of the house in all the commotion. And the Preacher's wife, relieved to hear it, sat down on the couch. And finally, she was able to relax for a few moments.

But ... as she did, she let her hand slide down between the cushions. And ... she found it. She felt the snake wriggling around in there. And she screamed and fainted, and the poor snake rushed back under the couch where it was safe. And the neighbor man, seeing her passed out on the floor, started CPR on her.

And right about then, the neighbor guy's wife, who had just returned from the grocery store, saw her husband on the floor with the preacher's wife, giving her mouth to mouth, mind you. And ... well what would you think? She bagged him with a sack of groceries. Hit him right in the back of the head (and hard) with a sack full of canned peas and lima beans and Spam. She hit him with Spam. So now, he was out cold with a gash in the back of his head. So they called 9-1-1 again. And when the paramedics looked him over, they decided he needed to go to the hospital, too. At least, that was the story as they told it. But here's what really happened.

When the neighbor's wife canned him with her bag of groceries, he hit the floor hard. And the noise, of course, woke the poor preacher's wife, who turned and saw her poor, kind-hearted neighbor stretched out on the floor with his wife standing there over him. And she knew, of course, what had happened. The poor man had been bitten by that viper. So she went to the kitchen, brought back a small bottle of Whiskey (which they kept on hand for medicinal purposes, of course). And she started pouring it down the man's throat.

And by that time the police had come. And they saw the unconscious man, smelled the whiskey, and well ... what would you think? They thought a drunken brawl had taken place right there in the parsonage. And they were about to haul them all in, I think, when the two women tried to explain how it all happened over a mean, green garden snake. And they (the cops, mind you) called the ambulance, which took away the neighbor and his sobbing wife.

And just then the little snake crawled out from under the couch and made a bee-line for one of the officers. And it startled him so that he drew his gun and fired. And he missed the snake, of course. But he did hit the leg of the end table beside the couch. And when the table fell over, the lamp hit the floor and shattered and caught the drapes on fire. And as the other policeman was trying to beat the flames out with his hat, he fell through the window, out into the front yard, right on top of Ralph the Bassett Hound. Which nearly scared the poor dog to death. And he jumped up and ran right out into the street. And a car had to swerve hard to miss the dog. And when it did it smashed right into the police car.

Meanwhile, the burning drapes had now spread to the walls and the whole parsonage was going up in flames. And the neighbors had already called the fire department. So the fire truck came roaring around the corner, and the new guy started raising the ladder halfway down the street -- before they even pulled over. And it was tall -- a little too tall, I think. So as they sped down the street toward the blazing parsonage, the ladder tore out all the overhead wires. And there was no power or telephone service in a ten block area for hours. ✖

Time passed ... and the preacher and the neighbor guy were discharged from the hospital. And the parsonage was rebuilt. The police department got a new car. And all was right with the world.....

Just about a year later, I guess, the preacher and his wife were watching TV one evening, and the weatherman announced that the temperature would be dropping below freezing that night. And the preacher looked at his wife and said, "Gee, honey. Do you think we should bring the potted plants in for the night?"

That was six months ago ... sixth months. And she still won't let him back in the house!

**He was despised and rejected by men;  
(and by one woman in particular!)  
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;  
and as one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised,  
and we esteemed him not.**

There was a man somewhere in Galilee who knew about that. A man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. And he was despised (in a way) and rejected. An outcast, mind you, who was forced out of his home, not by a garden snake or a fire like the preacher -- not even by his own wife, really -- but because he had something called leprosy. Which was a horrible thing. A skin disease that disfigured a person bit by bit. And left them covered with blotches and sores. It could damage their nerves and eyes, or even disfigure their limbs, their hands and feet. It was a dreadful thing, really. And people were scared. They were terrified of this stuff -- and who can blame them? It could destroy their lives, their homes and their children.

So they tried to stay as far away from it as they possibly could. And if someone had the signs -- the white blotches on their face and arms, they'd shoo them away as quick as they could. Put them out of their house and out of the village. Out where no one would have to be near them. And if someone did come near, the leper would have to warn them and shout, "Unclean! Unclean!" As if to say. "Stay away from me. You can't come near me. I'll infect you. I'll taint you. I'll ruin everything for you."

That's what made it such a horrible disease. It cut people off. It kept them away from the people who loved them and from people who cared. It kept them out of their homes and out of the community. And it even kept them out of the church -- out of the synagogue and out of the temple. Because people in those days believed that something as hideous as leprosy must be a

sure and certain sign that God was not pleased with the person who had it. So they were pronounced unclean. Inside and out. And anyone who came near them or touched them would be unclean, too. Cut off from everyone -- including God. So they were to be avoided like the plague. Just like a dead body.

That's why this story in the very first chapter of Mark is so amazing, I think. Because this unclean, diseased, discarded leper comes up to Jesus, kneels down in the dirt right there in front of him, and says, "If you will -- If you want to, you can make me clean." And Jesus looked at him with .... what does it say there? With pity. With affection it says in the Greek. It means his heart went out to him. Jesus was moved by this man. He felt for him. He loved him. Isn't it odd. People thought God had disowned him. That he was so impure, so bad, so disgusting that God didn't want anything to do with him anymore. But God-in-the-flesh looked at him and his heart ached for him.

And then it happened. Jesus stretched out his hand and he touched him. It was the first time that man had felt the touch of another person in who knows how long. And with that touch, Jesus said, "I will. Be clean." And all of a sudden the leprosy left him. And something else happened, too. He was made clean. Inside and out. He could go home, now. He could hug his wife and put his arms around his children. He could worship God in the synagogue and go to the temple with his friends and his neighbors. It was as if he'd been raised from the dead. And his whole life was restored with that touch.

But did you notice what happened to Jesus? With that touch the One who was pure, inside and out, became unclean. And with that touch, Jesus became the outcast. And it was Jesus, now, who couldn't go into town. It was Jesus, now, who had to stay out in the countryside. For when he healed the man, Jesus said, **Don't tell anyone. Don't say a word about this. Just go to the priest and give thanks to God. But don't tell anyone what's happened here.**

But he couldn't keep quiet. He just *had* to tell somebody. I mean, wouldn't you? He told everybody he knew. And in no time at all it was all over town. Everyone knew. And because they did, Jesus couldn't go into town anymore. At least, not out in the open. So the leper went home, but Jesus had to stay away.

But that's Jesus. He was willing to take the Leper's place. And he was willing to take your place and mine when he died on the cross ... It's all there in the Song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah:

**He was despised and rejected by men;  
 a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;  
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 he was despised,  
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 smitten by God, and afflicted.**

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 upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,  
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**All we like sheep have gone astray;  
 we have turned every one to his own way;  
 and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.**

Oh ... the leper said, "If you will. If you choose. If you want, you can make me clean and whole." And Jesus said, "I will. I DO choose. I DO want to." And he says the same thing to you today. If your heart is broken. If you've been forgotten. Or rejected. Or discarded by life. If you feel like the whole world has turned against you. If you feel like even God himself has abandoned you,

or given up on you. Or if for some reason you think you're too sinful, too guilty, too ashamed, or too far gone and you're all alone... know this: Jesus looks at you with compassion and grace. He looks at you with deep affection and love for you (just as you are, mind you), and he says, **I WILL... I CHOOSE ... I WANT TO TOUCH YOU** and **HEAL YOU**, and **RESTORE YOU**, and **GIVE YOU LIFE....** Real life.... Full and Good and Everlasting. And even now, he is reaching out to touch you. [Because he loves and delights in you so much.] And that touch can make all the difference in the world. ✕

It reminds me of a little girl named Mary Ann who was born with a cleft palate. And when she started school, she said, all the other kids made it clear to her how she looked to them. In their eyes, she was a little girl with a misshapen lip, a crooked nose, and lopsided teeth who didn't talk right. And that was it. That's all she was. She was left out. A castaway. Someone who felt unwelcome and terribly unwanted.

And when anyone would ask Mary Ann what happened to her lip, she'd say, "I fell down and cut it on a piece of glass. Because somehow," she says, "it seemed more acceptable to have had a terrible accident than to have been born different." And very early in her young life she was convinced that no one could ever love somebody like *her*, and that nobody would ever want to be *her friend*.

Now there was a teacher in the second grade that all the children just adored, I think. Mrs. Leonard was her name. And she was short and round and happy. And she just glowed with warmth and joy.

Every year they had a hearing test at school. Like an eye exam, in a way. Only it was for hearing ... to see if you had any trouble hearing.

And Mrs. Leonard gave the test to the children in her second grade class. And when it was Mary Ann's turn to be tested she knew exactly what to do.

Because they'd done it before. You'd stand next to the door, she said, and cover one ear. And the teacher would whisper something and you'd have to repeat it back to her -- things like, "Do you have new shoes?" or "The sky is blue" or "Today is Monday" -- that kind of thing. So she went and stood against the door. And she covered one ear. And she waited for the words ... And she heard Mrs. Leonard, the teacher all the children adored, whisper seven words. Words that changed her whole life. Because Mrs. Leonard said in her whisper, ***"I wish you were my daughter."***

And Mary Ann Bird, the little girl who thought she could never be loved knew she was loved. Because Jesus touched her heart and her life through those words. And she became someone who touches the hearts of countless others with her friendship and her love and her grace-filled words.

And today, here and now, Jesus reaches out to you to offer you that same healing, life-giving touch. The only thing he asks is that you do what Mrs. Leonard did, and touch the people around you who feel so far away from his love.

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we have turned every one to his own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.**

Jesus says, "I will .... I will touch YOU."

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

# Soli Deo Gloria

Benen, ObLSB

