

The Beauty and Brokenness of Touch

Ms. Shobana Vetrivel

The first book that I had on my to-read list for 2020 was a book called *Handle with Care: How Jesus Redeems the Power of Touch in Life and Ministry* by Lore Ferguson Wilbert. I had read a synopsis of the book somewhere and I was intrigued because in the last couple of years all the stories involving touch that I was hearing were negative. Especially in places that were supposed to be safe environments for giving and receiving of touch (family, church, communities), the news as well as personal experiences of people were full of stories of inappropriateness, abuse and exploitation. Living in Delhi as a woman, I was no stranger to unwelcome touch and most of the time my body was on guard to ward off touches in crowded spaces, usually a groping hand. Putting all this together, I was slowly reaching a conclusion that strong boundaries need to be maintained regarding touch, the lesser the better, to avoid all these situations. If you had told me that a church was coming out with a rule of no touching between members, I would probably have thought, maybe that's quite wise in these times!

As I read through the book, I was challenged to think through my response and my fears relating to touch. Then in early March, 2020 the global pandemic COVID-19 slowly came closer and closer and it seemed like all at once, we were being asked to not touch one another – not a handshake, not a hug, not a pat on the shoulder. We had advisories in church about no handshakes, no hugs, no sitting close to one another. In fact, we were to stay as far away as possible from one another. What seemed quite wise to me a month ago, felt odd and disturbing and was now thrust upon us whether we liked it or not. A little while into this physical distancing, I began reading a flurry of articles and reports on how the loss of touch was affecting people. Grandparents who longed to embrace their grandchildren had to stay away, people who were living alone went for weeks and months with no touch, people who were grieving couldn't share the comfort of a hug with one another.

As I reflected on this, the truth that stood out and which we intuitively recognise as believers is that touch is from God. Lore Ferguson Wilbert says that it is fundamental to how we understand touch, that it is God given and he created us as beings who live in a touchable material world and our way to engage in it purposefully is through our senses, one of which is touch. **Touch is beautiful** and it is so interwoven into our makeup that it affects our physical, emotional and cognitive development.

An article in *The New Yorker* on the power of touch¹, looks at the work of Tiffany Field who has done more than thirty years of research on touch. She sees the emotional and cognitive benefits of touch in both premature and full-term infants, pregnant women, children and adults with chronic pain conditions or emotional problems, and healthy adults. *“Even short bursts of touch—as little as fifteen minutes in the evening, in one of her studies - not only enhance growth and weight gain in children but also lead to emotional, physical, and cognitive improvements in adults. Touch itself appears to stimulate our bodies to react in very specific ways. The right kind can lower blood pressure, heart rate, and cortisol levels, stimulate the hippocampus (an area of the brain that is central to memory), and drive the*

¹<https://www.newyorker.com/science/maria-konnikova/power-touch>

release of a host of hormones and neuropeptides that have been linked to positive and uplifting emotions. The physical effects of touch are far-reaching.”

Most of us have seen the benefits of good touch or the right kind of touch in our lives - from childhood to adulthood to middle and old age. We received the warmth, comfort, joy and refuge of touch and have extended this to others. Touch has now largely become restricted to the sexual and so we hesitate to talk about it but so much of touch is non-sexual and is meant to draw us closer in families, marriages, singleness and in communities.

But as much as we have experienced the beauty of touch, our bodies also carry the trauma of touch that has been unwelcome, that has caused us harm, that has taken from us and has left us full of shame and pain. As with everything in this world, **touch is broken**. Touch has been manipulative, exploitative, oppressive and abusive. Not only are we carriers of this brokenness but we also create and perpetuate this brokenness. So what do we do with this landmine?

The Redeemer of Touch

When the Creator of the universe and the creator of our bodies came into the world, he came as an embodied being with hands and feet. One thing that has struck me again and again as I read the gospel stories is how often they mention Jesus touching people and being touched by them. When Jesus is moved with compassion he comes close and touches. He touches those that are unclean and would not have been touched for a long time. He is touched by those who are unclean and he doesn't shun them away. Children come to him and he doesn't send them away but lays his hands on them. He washes the feet of his disciples. A woman kisses his feet with her tears and while everyone else around him is uncomfortable, he welcomes this gesture. Again and again, Jesus reaches out and touches and ministers through his touch.

This has implications for us as we serve and minister in this world. The beauty of the gospel is the restoration and redemption that it brings in every area. Jesus through his own life and ministry exemplifies touch that is pure, healthy, loving and giving. But he also exemplifies receiving touch from others in ways that are pure, healthy, loving and giving.

As the pandemic has brought the issue of touch to the forefront, we have an opportunity to think deeply about how we give and receive touch and allow Christ to enter into our stories of touch. We live in a culture where touch rarely crosses social and class boundaries but Jesus crossed all these through his ministry. We need to discern with the power of the Spirit on how best we can love our neighbour through ministering touch that reflects our Saviour. There is no rule-book on this but given the touch deprivation that would result as we live through this pandemic, may our hearts and hands be renewed with love and compassion that sees people not just as spiritual beings but as embodied people, made in the image of God.

“We need an overhaul in how we think about humans and their stories, and how we interact with others as physical beings. We need discernment and Spirit-led love to know the caring ways to touch. We all carry with us an issue of blood. We are all cut by the Fall in different ways. And that means touch will come at us, and minister to us, and be given by us, in a myriad of ways as well. May God give us the discernment and the presence of mind to do all our stories of justice in the way we touch.” Lore Ferguson Wilbert

(This article has been written by Ms. Shobana Vetrivel. Shobana has a background in social development and has worked in both development and ministry settings. She is currently working as the Director of Operations for Delhi School of Theology).