

The Master's Touch
Matthew 20:29-34
Sermon by Dan Schrock
May 1, 2016

²⁹As they were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. ³⁰There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!" ³¹The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, "Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!" ³²Jesus stood still and called them, saying, "What do you want me to do for you?" ³³They said to him, "Lord, let our eyes be opened." ³⁴Moved with compassion, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they regained their sight and followed him. (NRSV)

I

On the corner of Neil and Forsythe Avenues in Columbus, Ohio, you will find a hair salon called The Master's Touch. The proprietors are Christina and Ed Anderson, an inter-racial couple who've owned this hair salon for more than 20 years. When we lived in Columbus, I usually went there so Christina could cut my hair—this was back in the days when I actually had some hair that needed to be cut. I went partly because it was convenient. Her salon was located just a few blocks from the church, so I could stop in on my way home or step out of the office to get my hair cut at lunch.

What really kept me coming back was the way Christina operated her business. At first I couldn't quite figure out what made Christina's salon unique. After the third or fourth visit I realized the name of her business had a double meaning. Not only does "The Master's Touch" suggest that she and Ed are master hair cutters (which they are), the name also slyly hints that through their work Jesus the Master will indirectly touch their customers. When I finally caught the double meaning of the name, I knew why I wanted to keep coming back. It was because the Spirit of Jesus permeated the salon.

It was nothing overt. Christina and Ed did not have Christian literature lying around. They didn't try to convert anyone, nor did they talk about church or God unless you brought up the topic. Their witness was more subtle. It was the authentic way they greeted you when you walked in the door, the gentle way they washed your hair before they cut it, the careful way they focused on the cowlicks or crazy curls in your hair to make you look good. Above all it was their touch, the physical interaction between their

hands and your head. It was almost magical. You walked out with your spine tingling and your spirit strangely restored. You wished you had a good reason to go back next week and experience it all over again.

II

The sense of touch may be the most complex of our five senses. The biological complexity of touch is why scientists don't yet fully understand the mechanisms that operate when we touch or are touched. What we do know is that touch has two distinct but parallel pathways in the body for processing information about touch. The first sensory pathway gives us the *facts* about touch, like vibration, pressure, and location. The second sensory pathway processes *social and emotional information* like the nature of our relationship with this person and whether we feel emotionally safe with them or not. Each of these two pathways uses a different set of sensors in the skin. This helps to explain the difference you feel when your best friend puts his or her arm around your shoulder, in contrast to when your boss or someone you don't like very much puts his or her arm around your shoulder. The same physical act of touch can have vastly different emotional and social meanings.¹

This may help to explain why customers like me loved going to Christina and Ed Anderson for haircuts. For them this is not just about the mechanical aspect of cutting hair, even though they are highly competent at the mechanics. Their work is more about the emotional and social aspects of touching their customers' heads. Or as Christina and Ed might say, their business is actually about the spiritual aspects of conveying Jesus to their customers. Their real work is to express the ministry of touch that we see in Jesus.

III

Touching was a big part of Jesus' ministry. The gospels tell us 14 stories of Jesus touching other people, or in a few cases, of Jesus being touched by other people. Children,

¹ Carolyn Gregoire, "How Our Sense of Touch Affects Everything We Do," *Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/20/neuroscience-touch_n_6489050.html, accessed April 22, 2016. Also see David J. Linden, *Touch: The Science of Hand, Heart, and Mind* (New York, Viking Penguin, 2015).

lepers, prostitutes, sick people, blind people, even dead people—Jesus touched them all. We want to emphasize as clearly as we can that Jesus’ touch was not domineering, controlling, or abusive. He did not use touch to punish, manipulate, or belittle other people. Nor did he touch others in ways they didn’t want. Instead his touch was gentle and compassionate. When Jesus touched someone it was for the purpose of healing, restoring, and blessing.² Jesus’ touch made people more whole. It made them *feel* more whole. And it connected them to the power of God.

In our story for today, Matthew tells about two blind guys sitting along the road leading out from Jericho. Apparently they already believe in Jesus, because three times they call him “Lord,” a title in the New Testament usually spoken only by believers. Twice they also call him “Son of David,” which is again a title Christians typically use for Jesus. Yet even though they believe in Jesus at some level, they want a fuller, richer connection with Jesus. They want their eyes to be opened.

Jesus is happy to oblige. In a spirit of compassion, the Master touches the eyes of both men. He offers no verbal prayer to God and speaks no words to the two men. He just touches them. That’s it. But it’s enough, because something wonderful happens. The sensory receptors in their eyelids feel the pressure and the temperature of his hands. The emotional and social receptors in their skin send a message to their brains that Jesus is someone they can trust, someone they can dedicate themselves to and build their lives around. He is someone worthy to follow in the journey of their lives. In the touch of the Master they are spiritually renewed.

IV

Anointing is a ministry of touch that the church has used ever since the days of Jesus. In a moment Marilyn and I will offer you the opportunity, if you want it, to be anointed with oil on your forehead. She and I are not Jesus; instead we are just representatives of the whole church. For New Testament authors, the whole church is the body of Christ and continues the ministry of Jesus in the world. Baptism qualifies each

² Patrick McCormack, “Just the Right Touch,” *U.S. Catholic*, June 1999, 48.

member of the body of Christ to function as Jesus' hands in the world. That means that each of you, like Christina and Ed Anderson of The Master's Touch, can somehow express Jesus' ministry of touch in your daily living. Marilyn and I are just representative expressions of what we are all called to do.

Marilyn and I will stand here at the front. If you want to be anointed, come down one of the center aisles and return to your seat by the outside aisles. As we do this, Deb will lead us in a mix of singing and silence, as she chooses.