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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, why do we do it? Why do we shake hands?

When we meet someone and we introduce ourselves to another person, we shake hands.

When we congratulate someone on a job well done, we shake that person's hand.

When we thank someone for their service, we engage in a handshake.

And when we make a deal with someone, we seal that deal by shaking hands.

The handshake is a really important gesture in our daily lives.

But, why do we do it?

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Now, the history of the handshake apparently dates back to the 5th century B.C. in Greece.

The handshake was a symbol of peace, showing that neither person was carrying a weapon, which was usually carried in the right hand.

So, people would shake hands by using their right hand, thereby emphasizing the fact that they were not carrying a weapon.

Now, during the Roman era, the handshake was actually more of an arm grab.

It involved grabbing each other's forearms to check that neither man had a knife hidden up his sleeve.

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Now, some say that the gesture of shaking hands started not with the Greeks or Romans, but in Medieval Europe, but under similar circumstances.

Knights supposedly shook hands in order to shake loose any hidden weapons.

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Now in our present day, handshakes sometimes occur using the left hand.

Boy scouts, for instance, shake hands using their left hands, because this is the hand nearest the heart and thus the handshake is offered as a token of friendship.

But in many parts of the world, the left hand is considered unclean.

The reason being, the left hand is used for “ablutions,” to put it as delicately as possible.

And so one would not shake hands using the left hand, let alone pick things up using the left hand, nor eat with the left hand, nor hand over money using the left hand.

But regardless of its origin, and regardless of the traditions surrounding the handshake, as a form of social interaction, the handshake has become rather ubiquitous in the world.

Many cultures and peoples around the globe engage in shaking hands.

Although, during the time of this pandemic, the handshake and all other forms of human contact have had to be shelved for a while.

We have had to forego the practice of shaking hands for many months because of the concern of spreading the COVID-19 virus.

But, now as we are emerging from this pandemic, people are beginning to shake hands again, as well as beginning to embrace each other again.

But, some feel that given what we have seen with the pandemic, we should really do away with the handshake altogether for reasons of good hygiene.

PAUSE

Now, my belief is that handshake is significant, and should not be done away with.

My belief is that the handshake is so important if for no other reason, IF FOR NO OTHER REASON, than it reminds us of another person’s humanity.

The handshake reminds us of another person’s humanity.

Because in a handshake we touch another person.

And we probably don't nearly give enough thought to that gesture of touch.

Indeed, human contact is so very powerful. Human contact is so vital to life.

Science has shown that children who have not had ample physical and emotional attention are at higher risk for behavioral, emotional, and social problems as they grow up.

In short, there are numerous benefits from skin-to-skin contact for mothers and babies from the moment of birth, throughout infancy, and beyond.

Human contact is important to human development.

And human contact continues to be important throughout our lives, again, because it reminds us of the humanity of another person.

God, in God's great wisdom, God created us humans with a body.

And with our body we are able to move around.

And with our body we are able to experience the world through our senses.

We experience the world by means of our body, by what we see, and smell, and taste, and hear, and touch.

And the sense of touch includes experiencing the personhood of another human being, through the gesture of a handshake.

PAUSE

Today's gospel reading highlights the amazing sense of touch.

Today's gospel reading brings the sense of touch to the fore.

Today's gospel reading tells us that Jesus was moving through a large crowd of people.

And in that large crowd of people there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for 12 years.

She had a health problem whereby she experienced incessant bleeding.

And as such, according to religious law, she would have been deemed unclean.

Because of her constant hemorrhaging she was deemed an outcast.

She was ostracized, not allowed to participate in any sort of worship life, and even banned from any sense of communal life.

Why? Because contact with this woman, according to religious law...any sort of contact with this woman would have made those persons themselves unclean, and ostracized.

So it is remarkable, that she is so bold as to touch Jesus.

And as persons hearing this story, we would think... "Oh great, now Jesus himself has been made unclean."

"Oh great, because this woman has touched Jesus, Jesus will have to go through a whole ritualistic process to be made 'clean' again."

But Jesus is not tainted with uncleanness when the woman touches him.

Jesus is not made ritualistically impure.

No, instead, power goes out from Jesus and the woman herself is healed.

Did we hear that? Instead of Jesus becoming unclean by the touch of this woman, power goes out from Jesus, whereby the woman is made well.

Power goes out from Jesus, as opposed to uncleanness attaching to Jesus.

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This point is driven home further, by the episode of Jesus and the little girl.

Jesus goes to Jairus' house to tend to his daughter, who in the course of the gospel reading has subsequently died.

And as with the case of the hemorrhaging woman, for Jesus to touch a corpse, it would result in Jesus becoming unclean.

But that is exactly what Jesus does.

Jesus goes into the house where the little girl is lying.

She is lifeless. She has died. And Jesus takes her hand, and we can only imagine the gasps of those who are witnessing this.

Jesus has touched a dead body. Certainly he has made himself unclean.

But wait! Jesus speaks to the girl, “Little girl, get up.”

And immediately, the little girl got up and walked around.

Once again, power has gone out from Jesus, restoring life to the little girl. And the uncleanness of death does not stick to Jesus.

PAUSE

And so, reading this passage, one can't help but believe that these stories in Mark's gospel are meant to challenge the religious laws that had forbidden persons from touching other persons under certain circumstances, like when a person is hemorrhaging, like when a person has died.

No doubt those religious laws had some practical significance; our ancient ancestors must have understood something about infectious diseases.

No doubt our ancient ancestors had observed that when people touched individuals who appeared in ill-health, like someone who is bleeding, or touched persons who had died...

Our ancient ancestors much have understood that to touch certain persons in certain circumstances resulted in those persons themselves sometimes getting sick.

Yes, our ancient ancestors must have understood something about infectious diseases, and so their religious laws reflected that understanding.

Don't touch sickly people. Don't touch human corpses.

Even today, we are mindful ourselves of the spread of infectious diseases, which is why we had to forego shaking hands during the time of this pandemic.

But, at the same time, sisters and brothers in Christ, we need to recognize the power that is inherent in human contact.

And this is why this passage emphasizes human contact—that is the touch of a woman who is hemorrhaging, and Jesus' act of touching a dead little girl.

There is power in human contact. There is healing in human contact, which is why for instance, we hug people when they are grieving, which is why we hold people's hands when they are dying, or stroke a child's head when they are sick.

Of course, we always need to be mindful of what is appropriate human contact and what is not.

We always need to be mindful, for instance, to ask a person before just going ahead and hugging them.

We need to be mindful not to assume it is okay to just touch another person.

It is said that persons should even inform a nonresponsive, incapacitated person before touching them.

Yes, we need to be mindful of what is appropriate human contact and what is not.

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That said, when we do then engage in human contact, when we shake hands with another person, when we embrace a person, or comfort them with a touch, we are reminded by that touch that that other person has life, has being, has been created by God, and is thus made in the image of God.

To touch another person is to touch one who is of God's own making. And that should give us pause, so as to value that person.

PAUSE

In art museums, in museums of historical artifacts, and the like, there are signs and reminders, stating, "Don't touch."

But, human life is different.

As human beings in relationship with one another, much of those bonds with other people are nurtured through human contact, in embraces, in hugs, in handshakes, in physical contact.

Instinctively, we humans exist in community where the message "don't touch" seems all but out of place.

As our gospel reading reminds us today, there is power in human contact.

There is power in human contact to heal, to nurture, to comfort, to empower.

But we do need to be respectful of others and discern whether they are receptive to our touch.

And so, this is what we learn from our Lord in this gospel reading for today.

We see that when persons are touched by illness, or touched by the specter of death...

Or when persons are touched by loneliness, or touched by sadness.

Or when persons are touched by fear, or doubt, or despair...

When we see persons in need, it is enough to remind them that Christ has touched their lives with persons who love them, care for them, and who will be with them.

As the body of Christ we are the people of God...and through us, Christ still touches those in need today. We offer love, care, and support to others as if it comes from Jesus himself.

We, as God hands and heart, enfold the person in need in loving mercy.

We are Christ's hands. We are Christ's divine touch in the world today. Thanks be to God. Amen.