

Sermon for January 10, 2010

The Rev John A. Baldwin

Our Old Testament reading this morning is one of the tenderest passages, I believe, in Holy Scripture. Addressed to the Israelites in exile in Babylon, where they felt oppressed, bewildered, hopeless and forlorn, the prophet Isaiah speaks God's words to them with compassion. "I have called you by name". "You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." "Do not fear for I am with you." "Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

The Israelites, and through them the Jewish people, and through them Christians ourselves, have all received a glimpse of God, not as a distant, remote, unmovable deity, but as a merciful, compassionate and loving Being with whom it is possible to have a personal relationship. Jesus of Nazareth intensified this awareness and understanding. We have in our Gospel reading this morning (the baptism of Jesus) God's blessing upon Jesus as he begins his public ministry, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus was the embodiment of God's merciful love in his preaching, teaching and healing. People felt special, cared for, understood. Jesus touched people spiritually, emotionally, and physically, laying his hands upon people and praying for their healing. Shortly after his Resurrection, as he gathered with his disciples, showing them his hands and feet and encouraging them to touch him, he also breathed on them saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

We also heard this morning in our Epistle about the visit of Peter and John to Samaria where they gathered with new believers, laid their hands upon them, and they received the Holy Spirit. (John 20:22) Church tradition holds that Jesus laid his hands upon the Apostles, commissioning them for discipleship and ministry. They, in turn, laid hands upon folks like those in Samaria praying for empowering by the Holy Spirit. The church in Rome, which looked to Peter as its founding apostle, continued this practice down through the centuries in every ordination of a deacon, priest or bishop. This practice known as Apostolic succession (the laying on of hands in an unbroken line back to Jesus himself) has assumed a very important place in the teaching and practice of Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and the Orthodox churches.

One might claim, not only with Ordinations, but also with Confirmation, Baptism, Rite 13 ceremonies, healing stations at the altar, and even perhaps in the Passing of the Peace itself, that we are touching and being touched by Jesus himself in this unbroken line back to the beginning. Why should this be important?

While your other four senses (sight, hearing, smell and taste) are located in specific parts of the body, your sense of touch is found all over your body. It originates with the tiny nerve endings in your skin, which give your brain messages about whether something is cold or hot, or if something is hurting you. You can lose your other senses, compensate and survive (albeit with difficulty). But if you lose your sense of touch your survival is

imperiled. Some areas of the body are more sensitive than others because they have more nerve endings. Have you ever bitten your tongue and wondered why it hurt so much? It is because the sides of your tongue have a lot of nerve endings that are very sensitive to pain. Your fingertips (with 100 touch receptors in each of them) are also very sensitive.

Beyond this, touch is also a primary means of communicating emotions and feelings. What parent has not felt themselves bonding with their infants as they've held and rocked them? What young child has not felt comforted by a loving parent embracing them with a hug? A pat on the back, a firm handshake, a warm embrace all convey caring, support and connection.

The importance of touch was grasped intuitively by the woman (in Matthew 9:21) who had suffered from a hemorrhage for 12 years as she said to herself "If only I touch Jesus' garment, I shall be made well." It was sensed intuitively by a frightened little boy at night who, when reassured from another room by a sleepy parent that God was with him, responded, "I want God with flesh on." That's essentially what the doctrine of the Incarnation is all about, God came into the world in human flesh in the person of Jesus. Through his touch and that of his disciples, ministers and faithful people down through the centuries, we too are touched by God, and in that touch strengthened, healed and redeemed.

Some 35 years ago, soon after the Passing of the Peace became an integral part of our Sunday liturgy, I turned to a woman sitting in a pew behind me, and extended my hand to Pass the Peace. She kept her arms folded and through clenched teeth said to me, "I do not pass the Peace." I've thought about her often through the years. What became of her? Did she soften in later years, or hold fast to her determination? Perhaps she was someone who was resentful of change in any form. She may have been an advocate of the school of thought that worship is only about me and thee God. The Passing of the Peace makes it very hard to ignore your neighbors. Perhaps she was someone who had been wounded in life, and was wary of a stranger reaching out to touch. As for me, the Passing of the Peace has always been a high point of the service, when I make contact with my brothers and sisters in Christ before we come to the altar for Eucharist together.

At Emmanuel we are a lively and energetic group, and the Passing of the Peace sometimes goes on far longer than it may in the average Episcopal Church. We need to be sensitive to those who are unaccustomed to our exuberance and not overwhelm or ignore the visitors in our midst. But ultimately it is a recognition that when we Pass the Peace to one another, we are extending the love and grace of a personal, intimate God who was fully present in our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.