

"It's in the Touch"

Psalm 126; John 12:1-8

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

June 5, 2016 – 3rd Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

O God, may your Word speak to our hearts today. Amen.

One of my favorite novels is by Sherwood Anderson and comes from 1919. It is named for the town where the action takes place—Winesburg, Ohio. This is the prototype American small town in the years immediately preceding WWI. Sherwood Anderson was, himself, a product of those days, and he was both a keen observer and a gifted storyteller.

The model for the fictionalized Winesburg was actually Anderson's own hometown of Clyde, Ohio, near Sandusky. When his novel was published it didn't sit too well with the people there because some felt, and probably correctly, that many of his characters were drawn from its actual residents. For the most part, they weren't flattered by the similarities.

I went to Clyde a few years ago and walked the streets and looked at the storefronts, many of which were there when Anderson was a resident. This novel, which I've probably read 30 or 40 times over the years as well as taught, came particularly alive for me that day as I was transported back a hundred years.

In reality *Winesburg, Ohio* is a series of separate stories with intertwining characters. The tales are reminiscent of the way that lives repeatedly cross in small towns. Anderson has the ability to search the souls of the people he writes about. Even in the space of a few pages we often come to know a person's secret self. This intimacy is Anderson's strength as an author and he influenced later writers such as Faulkner, Steinbeck, and Hemmingway.

One story in that book is about a man named Adolph Myers, though in Winesburg he picked up the nickname of "Wing." Someone pinned that on him because, whenever he got excited as he talked, he gestured like a bird in flight. Yet, the people of Winesburg really knew little about him | and nothing of his life before he arrived there some twenty years before.

Wing was always conscious of his hands, so that when he found himself becoming too expressive | he would thrust his hands in his pockets to hide them. These hands seemed, at times, to have a life all their own, one that existed almost apart from him.

Many years before Adolph Myers had been a young teacher in another state. He was liked and respected by his pupils. The author says of him that he was "meant by nature to be a teacher of youth. He was one of those rare, little-understood men who rule by a power so gentle that it passes as a lovable weakness."

When he was engrossed in instructing a student it was natural for him to touch a shoulder or pat a head. We're given to believe that it meant no more than kindly affection, and nothing more. One day, however, an emotionally-disturbed youth received a gentle touch and embellished upon it with a vivid imagination.

Soon afterward a rough saloonkeeper came to the schoolhouse and beat the young teacher with his fists. That night others came to his home intent on further harm, but Adolph escaped into the darkness never to return. He came to Winesburg by chance and there he stayed, unknown and friendless and never to teach again. Although he didn't understand what had started all that fury, he felt his hands were likely the key to this mystery.

Touch is an important part of all of our lives, an expression of our relationship to others. It can convey the most loving of emotions or it can be destructive in its impact. The same hands that can cradle a child can also inflict pain and suffering. Hands that are capable of bringing life, can also take it away. Our hands manifest the very best of ourselves, but they can also show our very worst side.

Our Gospel reading today tells of Jesus in the home of Lazarus, the same man to whom he had previously restored life. During the meal Mary, sister of Lazarus and of Martha, does a most unexpected thing. She brings a jar of expensive perfume and pours it on Jesus' feet. With a gentle touch she spreads it across his skin. Then she wipes off the excess with her own long hair.

No wonder it catches the disciples by surprise. What she does is extraordinary, especially for the time and culture in which she lived. A single woman didn't touch a man other than her husband, nor did she usually loosen her hair in public unless a prostitute. Yet, here is Mary applying the ointment with great care to Jesus' skin. Others in the room may have been appalled at her breach of convention, but Jesus accepts her gesture and defends her.

The perfume is perhaps what was left over after Lazarus' body was anointed for burial, a step in the preparation of a loved one who has died or is about to die. Here she offers Jesus a most tender gesture that mixes the tears of her sorrow with the soothing feel of the ointment.

The rest around the table are taken aback at her inappropriate and confusing actions. Here Mary touches Jesus, not as a lover, but as one who is about to die. Her hair is unloosed in this instance as a socially permitted expression of grief, for a woman's hair could be undone in mixed groups only as a sign of mourning.

Jesus, instead of backing away, receives this caring overture from Mary while the rest stare and seem perplexed. Their first reaction is judgmental. Mary alone realizes what the others have yet to discern, which is that Jesus is soon going to his death. He will enter Jerusalem a few days later, then within a week will be executed because he is the Messiah.

I find it interesting to note that women get but little space in the Gospels, perhaps because the books were all written by men in a paternalistic age; however, the women are often the ones who understand what is really going on while the men are oblivious to even the most obvious signs. So it is here. Mary is the one who sees into the future and reveals what is about to happen through her actions. The touch of her hands convey what she realizes better than what can be expressed through words.

When we are most intimately human we often use touch as a means of expression. It's a natural thing to do. In the weddings I perform I always have the couples face each other and hold hands as they make their vows. At that special moment they need to be connected to each other—emotionally, spiritually, and physically. You really can't promise your life and

love fully to another while standing across the room. You can't Skype it in either. It's a skin-to-skin moment if ever there was one.

When I visit in the hospital I try to be in physical contact with a person. Sometimes this may be the better way of connecting, especially when someone is so sick that words have become secondary. This kind of contact is not sexual or suggestive; rather, it's the meeting of two human souls in the most direct way possible. We are there, and together, and God is with us as well.

Touch, while it is one of the Lord's great gifts to us, must also be seen in its shadow side. Should we exceed proper boundaries, or abuse the good it can produce, then reaching out to another can be negative. Not everyone is comfortable with being touched, especially from someone they don't know well. Good intentions may be misinterpreted, so great sensitivity is also called for in relating to others this way.

We also need to understand that touching can also make us vulnerable, even as Mary in our scripture was vulnerable to the judgment of others. While we can determine when and how to touch, we can't always know how it will be seen or received. There is a risk. Yet, choosing to be safe by standing at a distance, especially in times of great suffering, can fail to give others what they may need most of all at that precise moment.

"Wing," the Winesburg man whose story we began with, was a victim of misunderstanding. His intentions were innocent, though perhaps a bit naïve. He reminds us we have to show some ability to discern where and how we employ this powerful gift. We have to respect the boundaries that others may establish to protect themselves. We may need to ask permission to hug another or to cross the line of casual friendship in other ways. And that's OK.

Some say that the eyes are the windows of the soul. If they are, then I think the hands must be the expression of the heart. For whatever it is we feel inside of us, it will be revealed through our hands—for good or for bad.

Hands, amazing hands, marvelous hands, creative hands, loving hands, hands in the service of humanity. Hands that link with others to witness for good. Jesus knew the power of touch—to receive it and to give it. And when we learn to put ourselves into God's hands, we will discover that we can come to embrace the world—one person at a time.