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Romans 14:1-12
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THE PERSONAL TOUCH

"For none of us liveth to himself, and no man
dieth to himself." Romans 14:17

I don't suppose that many people have ever stopped for long to consider the profound influence that can be exerted by the touch of one human hand.

We all understand what the human hand, guided by the genius of the human brain, can do in the field of art, music, and literature. We marvel at the hand of Michelangelo that can carve a Pieta or a Moses. We are thrilled by the hand of a Leonardo da Vinci who could put masterpieces of art like the Last Supper or the Mona Lisa on canvas. We are inspired by the hand of Brahms that could write the music for a German Requiem. The hands of these men and so many others like them have been a profound influence and inspiration on millions of people. But this morning we are not concerned with this kind of personal touch. Rather we are concerned with the warm, personal touch of one human life on another.

I do not know when or where the custom of shaking hands began, but I am quite certain that the custom goes back many generations. I have often asked myself why it is necessary, for example, or even desirable, for a minister to stand in the narthex on Sunday morning and shake hands with a large percentage of his congregation. To greet them of course is a fine thing. He sometimes discovers many things of value as he stands there. He learns of sickness and need which he might not otherwise be informed of. He picks up many other bits of information useful in the service of his people. And, of course, he also discovers just how effective or ineffective he may have been on that particular morning. I have always felt, however, that there ought to be one avenue of escape from church by which a person could leave without being trapped into shaking the minister's hand.

Be that as it may, how much the clasp of a human hand can mean! I have told some of you on occasion how many times those in the hospital, when I suggest a prayer will reach for my hand with theirs. We do seem to lend strength and support to one another, both physical and spiritual, when we clasp hands in love, and friendship and good will.

You may recall that in nearly every case of healing recorded in the New Testament Jesus touches the person with whom he is dealing. You will recall that when a sick woman standing behind him touched him, he turned and asked who had touched him, for said he, "I felt power go out of me."

We are physical beings as well as spiritual beings. We live in a physical world as well as in a spiritual world. We need a physical contact with others that assures us that they too share our

physical experience, our physical limitations, and that we are not alone. Lovers sing about, "The Touch of Your Hand". They embrace and in that physical act gain inspiration and exhilaration. What is true in romantic love is also true in other areas of life. Those who share together either a spiritual pilgrimage or an intellectual pursuit in the physical presence of others find that they grow and develop much faster than they ever could alone. That is obviously the reason why impersonal teaching machines can help us to learn but they can never educate us. They lack the personal touch.

II

Let me share with you one outstanding example of the kind of personal touch I am talking about and you will understand how impossible it is for a machine ever to accomplish what the warm friendly touch of one human being can accomplish.

Every teacher knows that the important thing is not what you do for a student, but what you do to a student that counts. Every person who has made any kind of worthwhile achievement knows that he owes much of his success, his accomplishment, to some other person who has shared with him the personal touch at some time in his life.

Such a teacher, many years ago, came to a little village school in Indiana--a school which had the reputation of getting rid of teachers within a month at the most. A half dozen so-called bad boys had been tough on previous teachers and this was going to be no less the case with the new teacher who happened to be a rather awkward, tall, raw-boned young man, not particularly good looking.

The leader of that band of boys had a certain amount of artistic ability which no teacher had as yet recognized. He cared nothing for books and often skipped school. On the day the young teacher arrived, this boy drew a picture of the teacher on the blackboard, knowing it would spark laughter and confusion. It was an excellent caricature of the teacher. Just as he finished his drawing, the teacher stepped into the room. He looked at the drawing and said nothing. When school was over he asked the boy to remain and spoke to him as follows:

"James, I see that you have ability to do things. I believe that you would make a great artist, or maybe even a poet. Your drawing shows that you have ability. Here is a book. I want you to read it, then draw the characters in it as they appear to you. Go home now and come back and show me what you can do."

When the teacher arrived the next morning, the young artist was there waiting. "Did you read any of the book, James?"

"Any of it? I read all of it. I sat up most of the night. I'll be drawing those characters for you today if you give me time from my other work."

"Take all the time you need, James," replied the teacher, with a smile that lighted up his homely face and touched the boy's heart.

That boy was James Whitcomb Riley, and the personal touch of that teacher was the spark that brought out of him the abilities that made him famous throughout the United States and the rest of the world.

But the story does not end there. As the years passed and as Riley became more famous, he one day met a negro elevator boy who said,

"Mr. Riley, I understand you write poems."

"Well," said Riley, "they may not be very good, but they're the best I can do."

Hesitantly, the boy said, "I write poems too, Mr. Riley. They may not be any good, but I like to write 'em."

"Bring me your next one," said Riley, "I'd like to see it."

Within a few days the boy was in Riley's room with his poem and Riley saw the genius that was in it. That negro boy was Paul Laurence Dunbar, son of an escaped negro slave, who went on to earn his rightful place in the field of American literature.

III

The personal touch, of course, does not have to be a physical touch. It can be a word of kindness, a friendly greeting, a smile. It can be put into a letter or note. What the personal touch does is to convey to a human being that there is another human being who cares about him. How much it helps to know that someone cares!

When I was the minister of a much, much smaller church than this one and had maybe less than two hundred members, I knew them all, and I could remember when I went home from the service on Sunday which ones were there and which ones were not there. Every Sunday afternoon I used to sit down and write a note to every person I could think of who had not been in church on Sunday and tell them that I had missed them. I was amazed at the response. It not only got them there the following Sunday, but it revealed to them that there was somebody who actually cared whether or not they were there. Over and over again they would mention to me how surprised and pleased they were that I noticed their absence.

I wish I could do that same thing in this church. But when on the average there are about 800 people here on Sunday morning at the two services, I am afraid I might send a card to someone who was here and whom I overlooked seeing, and you know what the consequences of that would be!

Many of you will remember my favorite mountain climbing story told by Sir Edward Whymper, who, many years ago conquered so many of the highest peaks in the Alps. I will not repeat the story save to say that in one of his books he insists that the greatest and most thrilling mountain climbing experience of his whole career was that time when he helped to the top of a mountain a crippled little man who could never have got to the summit without his help. He offered that man the personal touch, the helping hand that enabled him to share an experience that would otherwise have been completely unknown to him. It changed the life not only of the man whom he helped, it changed the life of him who did the helping.

IV

My friends, I understand how lonely your lives can often be. I know how many of you have had the experience of feeling that no one in the whole world really cares about you. I understand how bitter and frustrating it can be to arrive at that point in your life, that crisis in your life, when you suddenly realize that you have reached the top, and the way now is downhill. I know that there's not a vessel in the world large enough to hold all the loneliness, and bitterness, and frustration and sorrow that fills the minds and hearts of men.

You know this also. But I know one thing more that perhaps some of you do not know--God has his hand stretched out toward you. God can help you, God wants to help you, God loves you. It is not always easy, but there is a way in which you can walk which will enable you to put your hand into the hand of God and feel His personal touch upon your life. He can lift you out of your despair, and your frustration, your sorrow and your loneliness.

And to all of us, whoever we may be, let me also say this: That you and I can be the means through which the personal touch of God is mediated to another person who without us might never feel it. Every one of us who calls himself a Christian has a divine and holy responsibility to mediate the love of God to all those with whom we come in daily contact.

When Paul wrote to the Romans and said, "For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself," he was telling us that we are in this human experience together, and no one of us can ever be at his best self, and achieve his highest potentiality, until every one of us is at his best self and achieves his highest potentiality.

Don't let the troubles, anguish, sorrows, and sufferings of the world cast you into despair. The world has always been full of these things. Begin to play your part today in lifting this load by your smile, your word of encouragement, the warm grip of your handclasp. Be at your best today and every day and you will be doing the one thing and the finest thing you can do to promote peace and good will among all men everywhere. The peace and tranquility of the entire human race does in a very real sense depend on you.