

Easter 3B 2018, April 15, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

A handshake of welcome. The embrace of two lovers. A bear-hug reconciling a wayward son from his estranged father. Fist bumps when the winning basket is sunk with seconds left to play.

Touch communicates. Infants embraced, caressed and touched will thrive. Infants left alone in their cribs without hardly being touched will often have difficulty creating lasting relationships later in life.

Like words touch communicates both positively and negatively. A suggestive and inappropriate touch demeans and objectifies the other. Occurring at a young age may scar someone for life. A clenched fist striking a child or spouse communicates the opposite of love; rather a deep and boiling hatred, more often with oneself, only directed at an innocent victim.

A touch can heal what once was broken. An arm around a shoulder, an embrace of reconciliation, a hand held out signaling a new moment and an open future, and now a past that is truly in the past, forgotten and irrelevant to what is now ahead.

But a touch can be dangerous and risky. Hands held at marriage pledging total faithfulness for as long as we both shall live, binding oneself to the life of another, in health and illness, fortune or poverty, for better for worse. What a risk it is to touch and make such a pledge.

Among the community of believers we engage in what is called the "Passing of the Peace." Some see this as an opportunity to greet one's neighbor sitting close by. We touch each other, a handshake, sometimes an embrace. But passing the peace is more than just a greeting. That's why churches have narthexes. Here, inside this worship space and inside this worship service we don't just pass any peace, we pass the peace of Jesus, the risen Lord. And the peace Jesus gives is both healing and risky, life affirming and dangerous at the same time. To communicate the reality of his rising from the dead Jesus invites his disciples to touch him. "Touch me and see:" Jesus says, "for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." Obviously that's what someone must have thought they were seeing; a ghost and not a real person. No, touch me. I am real. I am me. I am risen .

Reach out and touch the risen Lord. But to touch is both healing and dangerous. Touching the divine is something you do at your own risk. It would be like trying to lasso a tornado, or riding a wild African lion. But the touch is healing. As healing as finding a cure for cancer, or being reconciled with an estranged family member.

We see in our first reading how the touch of Jesus changed Peter. Peter preaches to a crowd after he healed a man unable to walk since birth. He ascribes the healing power to God, the God of his ancestors, the same God who raised Jesus from the dead. See how the touch of Jesus changed Peter, wildly, dangerously. The man who cowardly denied Jesus, now a bold witness. Peter took a risk, touching the risen Lord. It was a dangerous, healing touch. Peter's life ended giving witness to the risen Lord, even as he was crucified himself. Yes, Peter was healed. His Lord forgave him the betrayal he committed. Peter lived repentant and forgiven. But that healing touch changed Peter forever.

The dangerous, risky touch separates us from the rest of the world. As the author of I John states, "The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him." To live touched by the grace of the risen Lord is a dangerous way to live. Living by grace, touched by the risen Lord, runs counter to the rest of the world. The world, as John calls it, the world that does not know Jesus, runs on power and control. Those who possess worldly power know how to manipulate

the sources of that power; money, political influence, the things that men and women desire. The results are not always bad. Growth in the economy, stability among nations. But even today we see the effects of power exercised for selfish and narrow gain: the use of chemical weapons in Syria, the forced starvation of citizens in North Korea; politicians trading in their influence for big corporate checks, and growing instability among nations.

Those touched by the risen Lord come to realize that desiring worldly power is not the only story to live by. We, touched by the living Jesus, live with a radical story which often conflicts with story of worldly power. The story of this risen man, Jesus, will come to a final, dramatic conclusion. Enemies will lay down their weapons of war. AR-15's and Tomahawk Missiles will be melted down and forged into plowshares and F-15 Strike Eagle jets will be re-tooled into harvesters and combines. There will be no distinction between rich and poor, because personal wealth will seem totally irrelevant to the running of the kingdom of God.

All of which is only true if the disciples touched a real person who actually rose from the dead. If the Jesus they saw was only a figment of their imagination, or a disturbance of their collective sub-consciousness, then there is no healing, there is no other story for the world to hear. There is only the story of raw power, and destruction, and dog-eat-dog and may-the-best-man-win and I'll make my fortune even if I have to climb over everybody to get there.

We believe this man risen from the dead tells a different story. A story with a different ending. The end of this story always brings Jesus and his life of radical self emptying for the sake of the world. We are touched by his life, a touch that is both healing and dangerous. It is healing because it is nothing less than the reconciling of God and humankind. Our feeble attempts to manipulate and control and coerce and destroy find healing in his story of rising from the grave into which our raw show of power buried him.

But its also dangerous to be touched by the risen Lord. For now you are to live your life by the Jesus story, and not the world story. Every time someone says to you, "So and so is a bad person, and you should have nothing to do with them," that's the world story trying to separate and manipulate. The Jesus story directs you to say, "I don't believe that's the last word about that person. God has the final word, and I'm going to stay open to a different possibility." Imagine how healing, and dangerous, it could be to go through life allowing God to make final and ultimate judgments, while you remain open to new possibilities God might put in front of you. Broken relationships might be mended, grudges give way to reconciliation. But the one who is open to forgiveness and healing makes a poor ally in the power struggles of this world. And that could be dangerous as well.

The Good News today for you and me is that the risen Jesus touched you in Holy Baptism and you have the opportunity to continue to touch him today. Continue to touch the risen Lord, a touch that is both healing and dangerous. Amen.