

Love Language - Physical Touch
by The Venerable Murray Spackman, Vicar.
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Readings: Acts 9:3-19. Luke 5:12-16.

We have long known that physical touch is a powerful way of communicating emotional love. Dr. Gary Chapman concludes that Physical Touch is one of the Five primary ways, which he calls Love Languages, in which we express emotional love to others.

So far, in this series we have looked at three of the 5 Love Languages: Words of Affirmation, Gifts, and Quality time. Today we look at the fourth – namely, Physical Touch.

Numerous research projects in the area of child development have made the conclusion that babies who are held, hugged and kissed develop a healthier physical and emotional life than those who are left for long periods of time without physical contact. I think we all, instinctively, know that that is true.

Some years ago, here, I baptised twin baby girls who had been adopted from a State Run orphanage in the then Communist-run country of Rumania. Video clips on our TV screens showed rows and rows of babies and young children in old hospital style cots left for hours on their own, and provided with only the absolute minimum of personal care, feeding and hygiene. Other than the changing of nappies and feeding, there was no other human interaction with these babies whatsoever. The photos I was shown of these little girls in their cots, before they were brought out to N.Z. showed them to be socially and physically withdrawn and underdeveloped. While they were about 2 ½ - 3 yrs old, they were only the size and mental and emotional development of about 12-18month olds infants. Yet, within just a matter of a few months, in their new home, with plenty of hugs, physical touch, cuddles and kisses, as well as good food and hygiene, the children's lives were transformed, physically, mentally and emotionally.

Wise parents, in any culture, are touching parents! In the first century, parents brought their children to Jesus "to have Him touch them". And Jesus took them in his arms and blessed them.

Long before the child understands anything about the meaning of love, the child feels loved by physical touch. Hugging and kissing a six-year-old as he or she leaves for school in the morning is a way of filling the child's emotional love-tank, and thus preparing him for a day of learning. And if the child's love Language is Physical Touch – then nothing is more important.

The teenager whose primary love language is Physical Touch may draw back from your hugs and kisses – as a parent – but it doesn't mean that he has no desire for touch- he will just want that expressed in a different way – a way that's 'cool'. So parents must learn new dialects – new, appropriate ways, to express that Love Language - through physical touch. For boys- something as physical as a friendly slap on the shoulder, a bit of wrestling on the floor, an elbow jolt, or a light-hearted

push off balance as you pass by – might fill the teenagers love tank. For a girl – appropriate hugs, holding hands and friendly physical contact will meet that same deep emotional need.

Physical touch is also an extremely powerful vehicle for communicating expressions of marital love, isn't it? Holding hands, kissing, embracing, and of course sexual intimacy are all ways of expressing emotional love, physically, to one's spouse. Without those physical expressions of closeness and affection, we feel unloved! - With physical touch, our emotional love-tank is filled and we feel secure in the love of our spouse.

There is a common saying that "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach". I think it would be more accurate to say "The way to SOME men's hearts is through their stomachs," – but for many others it will be through the Love Language of Physical touch.

While most men will certainly enjoy and appreciate a good and hearty meal, for many men, this is NOT, necessarily, what fills up their emotional love tank! It may well be, more likely, physical touch, and especially the sexual relationship. For the person whose Love Language is Physical touch, a hug, a touch, an embrace, the sexual relationship will communicate far more of the essence of emotional love than will Words of Affirmation, or Receiving Gifts, or even Quality time.

I grew up in a family where physical touch was a very common way of expressing love! Dianne didn't! And in the early days of our courtship she was surprised at how much my family would hug and touch and kiss one another. We would greet each other with hugs and kisses and farewell each other with hugs and kisses. She jokingly used to call us the 'kissy' family – but that's how we expressed love for one another. And Dianne has adopted and learned those ways too- because that's what fills up my emotional love-tank! I just love it when I'm working at my desk and Dianne brings me a cup of tea and simply puts her hand on my shoulder, or rubs my back. So we are often seen holding hands when we go shopping; or taking a walk together, – or very carefully - when we're out driving! We frequently give each other a hug or a touch as we pass each other in the house; Dianne gives a kiss goodbye when I go out, and when I return home, - and these are all little but important expressions of emotional love through physical touch.

But how do we express love and friendship through physical touch to others outside of our immediate family and close circle of friends? How do parishioners, and how does the Vicar, convey warmth, friendship and care to one another through physical touch without it being misinterpreted as misconduct, or a crossing of personal boundaries, or in some other way inappropriate? With so much publicity having been given to instances of sexual misconduct in the Church, the tendency might well be to back off from any form of physical contact. But I think this is where we all need to be careful but not paranoid. And it's not only in the Church either, is it? Teachers are not allowed to – or certainly are advised NOT to, touch their pupils – even when they are distressed or upset, and a caring, innocent and comforting arm around them is what they need more than anything else! So there is a tendency to shy away from almost any physical contact whatsoever, in case it is misunderstood.

I think we need to reclaim some good common sense and ensure that any appropriate physical touch – whether it’s a touch on the arm, a friendly hug, even a friendly kiss – is a mutual expression, and not an intrusion or imposition by one on the other.

But there are times when it is almost instinctive and natural to hug another, and that is in a time of crisis. It is then, more than at any other time, when we need to feel loved. We cannot always change events, but we **can** survive if we feel loved! And physical touch is a universal way of expressing that care and comfort.

I have learnt, over the years, that in times of crises, people don’t really want explanations, or words or sermons or lectures! What they really want is just an indication of your love and concern – - maybe a hug, or just someone to sit with them and hold their hand. The hug and other expressions of care will be remembered and appreciated far more than any words.

Its comforting to know, then, that God also speaks our language God, too!

He reaches out and touches us. Sometimes that ‘touch’ may be in the form or shape of an intense inner experience or feeling – while at other times it may be literally, physical. We should not belittle or underestimate what others tell us when they say that God has ‘touched’ them. In the Old Testament Jacob has this encounter with a spiritual presence in the form of a man who begins to wrestle with him. In the process Jacob’s hip is wrenched, but Jacob saw this as an encounter with God. Jacob was indeed ‘touched by God.’

Moses, also, encountered God in a way that affected his physical body. When Moses descended the mountain after receiving the Ten Commandments, the Scriptures say “he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord.”

Jesus’ life was one of continually making physical contact with people, even when it was culturally or religiously frowned upon. Jesus made some mud and put it on the blind man’s eyes, and he could see;– he touched the leper, and said, “be clean”. When Peter’s mother-in law was sick with fever, Jesus “touched her hand, and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him.” A few days later, in another village, Jesus encountered two blind men who followed him, calling out “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on us!” He touched their eyes and said, ‘According to your faith will it be done to you’; and their sight was restored. Followers of Jesus have been serving, and healing and touching in His name throughout the centuries.

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles in the New Testament is the history of what God did through those early believers as they continued the serving, touching, healing ministry of Jesus.

The conversion of Saul, the persecutor of the early church, was surely influenced by God touching him, physically, when a bright light from heaven shone around him, and he fell dazed, to the ground. At the end of three days God sent a man named Ananias to the house where Saul was staying. Ananias – significantly - places his hand on

Saul, - touches Saul - and immediately Saul is filled with the Holy Spirit, and something like scales fell from his eyes., and he could see again. Read the Book of Acts and you will see him beaten, imprisoned, and often threatened by death, but nothing dampened the spirit of this man who had been touched by God.

Perhaps we should also be aware that in our worship, in our private quiet times with God, wherever we may be – that there also God may touch us with some physical experience and assure us, through that, of His grace and love. While our knowledge or awareness of God’s presence is not dependent on such physical touch – nevertheless such experiences may well make us more aware of Him, especially if our Love Language is physical Touch, and God speaks to us, expresses His love to us, in that language we are familiar with.

Since the first century, thousands of men and women have claimed to have been touched by God. They in turn have reached out and touched others. Not just those working in rescue missions befriending the homeless; in drug and alcohol centres bringing new hope to the hopeless, or in hospitals and hospices bringing comfort to the sick and the dying. They are also the ordinary people like you and me who will simply put an arm around those in need. They are also the “greeters” in our churches who with a smile, extend an outstretched hand and give an affirming welcome as you enter this house of worship. These people, ordinary people, are channels of God’s love, speaking fluently the love language of physical touch.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Discuss how moods, attitudes and perceptions all affect whether or not we desire to be touched on a given occasion.
2. What are some of the factors which determine appropriate and inappropriate touching?
3. Do you remember a time of crisis when someone gave you a hug, put an arm around you, or held your hand? How did you feel?
4. Do you remember any experience when you would say God has “touched” you, and what was it like?

What was the effect upon you of God’s touch, and how has that influenced your Christian journey?