

THE HEALING POWER OF TOUCH

Ever heard of Charlie Wedemeyer? Look him up on the WEB sometime; HIS is a wonderful, INSPIRING story. Well, his friend, Roger Crawford, in his book, How High Can You Bounce? tells the story of his friend, Charlie Wedemeyer. He writes: *When Charlie Wedemeyer was 30, he had a life MANY would envy. He had been an outstanding college football player at Michigan State University. He was a successful high-school teacher and football coach at Los Gatos High School in California, married, and blessed with two gorgeous children. One day, Charlie noticed that he was having trouble gripping the chalk when he wrote on the blackboard. Then his whole right arm grew weak. The family physician suggested a battery of TESTS. The diagnosis was worse than anything they could have imagined: ALS/Lou Gehrig's Disease. 'Charlie, you have two years to live,' the doctor told him. THAT was 19 years ago. As I write this, Charlie is STILL very much alive (& actually, it's NOW been 29 years and Charlie is STILL very much alive). Certainly ALS has wreaked HAVOC with his body. He has lost the use of his LIMBS, the ability to raise his HEAD, and he can no longer TALK. A respirator gives him oxygen, and a feeding tube provides nourishment to keep him alive. WHAT ALS has TAKEN from the Wedemeyer family is OBVIOUS. But it has ALSO revealed their RESILIENCE. Charlie told me that he doesn't want ANYONE'S sympathy. 'Roger, REMEMBER that we're ALL terminal. I've ALREADY outlived one of my DOCTORS! I'VE got ALS.... We've ALL got SOMETHING. What I found out 19 YEARS ago (& NOW 29 years ago) was that ALS was my DIAGNOSIS, but MISERY was strictly OPTIONAL.' I ASKED Charlie what he MISSED MOST. 'HUGGING!' he replied. 'Being able to put my arms around someone and give them a HUG. But I still GET plenty of hugs. ALS can take EVERYTHING from me, EXCEPT what I need most -- LOVE and LAUGHTER.'* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998, 98-100).

You know, when I READ that paragraph, I REALIZED that WE don't HUG enough. I think OURS has become a "HANDS-OFF" culture! We have this "Don't TOUCH me" attitude. And in ONE sense, that's GOOD, especially with so much sexual MISCONDUCT around. THINK of the thousands and THOUSANDS of people who have been SCARRED for LIFE by INAPPROPRIATE touch – whether it's at home, in school, at work, or sometimes even at CHURCH. Well, that's NOT the kind of TOUCH I'm talking about. I'M talking about the kind of TOUCH that is HEALTHY and life-giving, LOVING, and HEALING.

Diane and I have a FRIEND who went through a BLOODY divorce a number of years ago. And WHILE it was happening, she OFTEN came to our house and just talked and talked, sometimes for HOURS. Well, one night as we listened, it became OBVIOUS to me that she needed MORE than just good LISTENERS. She needed to be HUGGED! She needed to be HELD. She needed to CRY on someone's SHOULDER. SO, at the right moment, I walked over and just held my ARMS out. I didn't pull her IN. I just offered her an OPPORTUNITY. Well, I'll tell you: she LUNGED for my NECK! And she HUNG ON for dear life, and CRIED and CRIED, and CRIED some more, until there were NO tears LEFT. And WHEN that prolonged hug ENDED, she felt BETTER, and STRONGER, and more able to COPE. Well, THAT is the HEALING power of TOUCH.

Do you know WHY we join HANDS at the END of worship each week? It's **not JUST** because it symbolizes our UNITY in Christ. THAT'S only PART of it. It's ALSO because, one day, an elderly WIDOW said to me: *You know, Gordon: SINCE my husband died, holding HANDS at the END of WORSHIP is very OFTEN the ONLY time in a whole WEEK that I feel the TOUCH of another human being. And I find it SO REJUVENATING and HEALING. Thank you for INSTITUTING it. And in my LAST church, during 2 of our 4 services each Sunday, we offered an ANOINTING with oil and a*

BLESSING. And people LOVED it, because they found that BRIEF moment of TOUCH and PRAYER to be so HEALING and LIFE-GIVING.

You know, I think that we OFTEN underestimate the HEALING power of TOUCH. In fact, I KNOW we DO. Do you realize that the United States is one of just a FEW countries in the entire world where therapeutic MASSAGE is NOT generally covered by HEALTH insurance? It's TRUE, although MORE companies are starting to cover it more OFTEN. And there's a certain psychologist who claims that HUGGING is the KEY to mental health. In fact, SHE claims that we can HUG away most of our blues and frustrations. She says we need a MINIMUM of 4 hugs per DAY just to SURVIVE for very long. And for any real GROWTH to occur, we need at least 12 hugs per day. Now, I'm not sure that I'd go THAT far, but she DOES make an important POINT. The HEALTH benefits of touch have been clearly PROVEN – and by scientific methods. For example, BABIES who are HELD more will gain more weight and master basic motor skills FASTER than babies who receive LESS holding and LESS touching. Studies also show that the ELDERLY benefit from TOUCH in much the same way. Among those who received REGULAR touching -- from massages to hugs to holding hands – researchers found the following to be true: their motor skills remained sharper, their mental abilities continued to be acute, and their general state of health was BETTER than among those who reported NO physical contact with others. And that TOUCH doesn't even need to be HUMAN. Just patting a dog, or stroking a cat, fills our NEED for TOUCH. Stephanie Baute will tell you that from HER experiences with her DOGS in PET therapy.

Well, JESUS knew WELL the healing power of TOUCH. Whenever He HEALED someone, He laid His HANDS on that person. When He GREETED someone, He ALWAYS seemed to have TOUCHED that person. In fact, in today's GOSPEL lesson, we read about 3 encounters that Jesus HAS, and TOUCH is CENTRAL in all 3. EACH encounter involves HEALING, and bringing WHOLENESS to people THROUGH the power of TOUCH. Jesus is called to heal Jairus' DAUGHTER, a young girl who has DIED. SO, He goes INTO her ROOM, takes HOLD of her hand, and she RISES! Now, you MIGHT say that THAT'S the power of FAITH, and it IS. But it's ALSO the power of TOUCH! The woman with hemorrhages believes that, IF she can only TOUCH the HEM of His CLOAK, she will be HEALED. And LO and BEHOLD, she IS! But what's even MORE amazing, is that Jesus actually FEELS the POWER go OUT from Him, as LUKE'S Gospel says, in HIS version of the story. He KNOWS that He's been touched, for there is POWER in TOUCH. And FINALLY, with the 2 BLIND men who come to Jesus begging to be healed, Jesus TOUCHES their EYES, and they SEE again. Yes, that TOO is the power of FAITH. But it's ALSO the power of TOUCH! And Jesus KNEW that POWER!

St. PAUL ALSO knew it. In our Scripture Lesson today from Second Timothy, Paul WRITES to his young protégé: *For THIS reason I remind you to REKINDLE the GIFT of God that is WITHIN you THROUGH the LAYING on of my HANDS. For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of POWER and of LOVE and of SELF-DISCIPLINE.* Yes friends, there IS power in TOUCH, because THROUGH it, God's HEALING and life-giving SPIRIT is at WORK. And THAT'S why, ever SINCE Jesus was among us, TOUCH has been extremely IMPORTANT in the life and ministry of the church. The Sacrament of Baptism ALWAYS involves TOUCH, regardless of HOW or WHEN it is performed. In MARRIAGE, a couple JOINS their RIGHT hands and makes the VOWS of lifelong love and fidelity to one another. When we receive NEW members, we offer them the RIGHT hand of FELLOWSHIP. And of course, in CONFIRMATION, in ORDINATION, and in the COMMISSIONING of Deacons and Stephen Ministers, we CONTINUE that beautiful and ancient RITUAL that St. Paul SPEAKS about in our Scripture Lesson, *the LAYING on of HANDS.* Yes, touch

has ALWAYS been very IMPORTANT in the life and ministry of the church. And THAT'S because God's SPIRIT is at WORK in it.

In my LAST church, we had a Tuesday evening PRAYER Circle. And THAT group learned the HEALING and life-giving power of TOUCH very quickly. They would gather around someone in pain, DO an ANOINTING, a laying on of hands, and a PRAYER. And EACH time, the RECIPIENT would affirm how SPECIAL, how LIFE-GIVING, and how spiritually and emotionally HEALING that time of TOUCH and prayer WAS for them. And I'm working on getting a SIMILAR kind of PRAYER Circle started here in OUR church, because I think it's IMPORTANT to our MINISTRY of caring.

Furthermore, I'm exploring with our staff and Deacons the possibility of offering next year a regularly-scheduled HEALING service, which will have elements similar to the one that we did a few WEEKS ago, on the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend. Now, DON'T get me WRONG! When I talk about a HEALING service, I'm NOT talking about Oral ROBERTS and HIS kind of healing. I DOUBT that very many people will come INTO the church in a WHEELCHAIR and leave RUNNING! We're NOT talking so much about PHYSICAL healing as we are about SPIRITUAL and EMOTIONAL healing. Now, THAT doesn't mean that PHYSICAL healing WON'T ever happen. REMEMBER: with GOD, ALL things are POSSIBLE! But our FOCUS will be on EMOTIONAL and SPIRITUAL healing and renewal. And as the basic ELEMENTS of our healing service, we will UTILIZE the ANCIENT Christian RITUALS right out of the BIBLE, the rituals of ANOINTING with oil and the LAYING on of HANDS, sometimes the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper and of course, PRAYER, along with some MUSIC and a brief message. And again, WHENEVER we offer such services, I invite ALL of you to take advantage of the WONDERFUL opportunity to BENEFIT from the HEALING power of TOUCH - - and PRAYER.

Yes, AS I said, TOUCH has been an INTEGRAL part of the church's life and ministry for 2000 years, and it STILL is. We STILL see MUCH evidence that God's Spirit works IN and THROUGH the loving and caring TOUCH of faithful people. Again and again, AS in our Scripture Lesson, that SPIRIT brings HEALING, HOPE, and NEWNESS of life into people's lives. And LIKE Timothy, WE need to always REMEMBER that and CARRY it in our hearts. You see: Christianity is not JUST a religion of IDEAS and IDEALS, DOCTRINES and DOGMAS. It's ALSO a very down-to-earth, PHYSICAL and MATERIAL religion. It TOUCHES people! SO, when **you** see NEWCOMERS in church, don't just SMILE at them; go up and offer them a FRIENDLY handshake. Offer them a TOUCH. And when you VISIT somebody in a hospital or nursing home, DON'T just TALK with them; HOLD their hand as you talk. And when you're WITH someone who is STRUGGLING or grieving, DON'T just LISTEN to them. Yes, DO that, but ALSO offer them a HUG – and maybe even a few TEARS. Remember, STRENGTH and HEALING and LOVE flow out of THESE hands – and THESE hands – and THESE hands – and EVERY PAIR of hands in our church family. And THAT'S because TOUCH is God's GIFT to us! And it's a POWERFUL gift that we can USE, and USE, and USE some more, to DO God's WORK of LOVE and REDEMPTION in people's lives. For WHENEVER we TOUCH -- appropriately, faithfully and lovingly as Christians -- GOD works IN and through OUR touch to fulfill GOD'S will and GOD'S purposes. Yes, THANKS be to GOD for the HEALING power of TOUCH. Friends, let's join HANDS as best we can, ALL around the church, for a moment of PRAYER.

PRAYER (join hands): O God, AS we join hands with one another today, maybe with someone we KNOW and love, OR maybe with a STRANGER, HELP us to get BEYOND our feelings of DISCOMFORT. Help us feel at EASE, and to FEEL the ONENESS of this church family, UNITED in prayer. AND help us ALSO to experience, in some SMALL way, the HEALING power of TOUCH, that IN the holding of each other's hands, we might feel strengthened and renewed as we feel YOUR presence and love among us. We pray in Jesus' name. AMEN.