

## **Touched by the Lord**

Bryn Athyn Cathedral, June 27, 2021, Reverend Philip B. Schnarr

*To touch with the hand is to communicate and transfer to another what pertains to oneself.*  
Apocalypse Explained 79

Our subject this morning is “Being Touched by the hand of the Lord.” To be on the receiving end of the Lord’s Divine power. The hands of the Lord. Symbols of His power.

In our first lesson from Revelation,...the disciple John saw with his spiritual eyesight a vision of the Lord. He was so awed, humbled and yes terrified that he fell on his face before “the Son of Man.” He lay virtually lifeless before Him. But immediately afterwards, John was touched by the right hand of the “Son of Man.” His fears were calmed. Right away John was given an incredible mission to write the Book of Revelation, a book which encapsulates the fulfillment of all prophecies, that the Lord would establish a new heaven and a new church on earth that would endure forever.

Yes, the Lord touched John’s body with His hand and His life was infused into him. This brought a whole new perspective and mission for John’s life. And it shows in dramatic fashion how the Lord’s touch, the inflowing of His Divine truth and goodness changed the life of His disciple John and in analogous ways illustrates how human touch also has great power to change our lives.

As we read earlier from the Heavenly Doctrine, “To touch with the hand is to communicate and transfer to another,” something of ourselves (AE 79). So let’s talk first about human communication through the sense of touch.

Picture this. Picture a grandmother who has a ten-year-old granddaughter. They live far apart but they travel to visit as often as possible. They love each other very much. But then a pandemic arrives and month after month it is impossible to sit close or hug. More than a year goes by. Sharing meals, swimming in the lake together, doing projects. And yes holding hands. These are all gone. And there is a cost to this. There is something missing in the communication, in the transfer and in the reception of thoughts and feelings these two people desire to share.

True. Video phone calls and chats have been regular and fun for many families throughout pandemic conditions. But the palpable communication which happens in shared space has been seriously missing for many of us. And we all know that empty feeling deep inside when the ones we love are no longer within arm’s reach. Many of us are now becoming more aware of just how much we depend on the physical spheres and real tangible touch of others, to feel right with ourselves and properly, emotionally adjusted to the physical world we live in.

When we touch physically, specifically for the sake of communicating an unselfish love, a connecting channel unlike any other is opened. Throughout Scripture we are given numerous illustrations of this happening.

Jehovah told Moses to lay his hand on Joshua and so transmit and transfer some of Moses’ glory and power to Joshua so that all of the Israelites would now follow him (Numbers 27: 18-20; see AC 10023:2).

When the prophet Daniel received a vision of the Lord, like John, he lost all of his strength. Daniel fell into a deep sleep with his face to the ground when an angel touched him and told him not to be afraid (Daniel 10: 8-12).

And in the New Testament time after time Jesus laid His hands on people, touched them or took them by the hand to restore their sight, their hearing, cure them of disease, or bring them back to life from death's door.

One particularly illustrative incident happened in our first reading from Luke 8: 42-48.

When the Lord was surrounded by a crowd of people seeking His help, a woman approached Him from behind and touched just the fringe of His clothing. Immediately her blood disease was cured. And we heard Jesus say, “Somebody touched Me, for I perceived power going out from Me.”

The woman came forward physically trembling: “And falling down before Him, she declared to Him in the presence of all the people the reason she had touched Him and how she was healed immediately.

Here in this New Testament account is an example of how touch can be a formidable force for good. Wherever and whenever the Lord Jesus Christ is in a touching connection with someone we can know that a life-giving communication is flowing forth. But notice this very important detail in how this story ends. Jesus said to her, “Your faith has made you well.” It was not a purely magical, miraculous, physical touch. The woman's desire and consent made her a willing and faithful recipient for the Lord's healing power to be received. Above all, the Lord respects a person's free will and the self-determination of their own spiritual identity and destiny.

Reflecting on the original terms used for the word “touch” in the Old and New Testaments we can see how the Lord's communication, His connection with His church on earth shifted after His incarnation. In the Hebrew of the Old Testament the verb “touch” is “נָגַח [naga].” And its use often connotes the idea of extending one's power over another – or to smite or to strike or even to beat down or defeat. But in a more positive sense “נָגַח [naga]” can also refer to more positive touching. In Exodus where priests were to touch holy things such as the altars and utensils in the Tabernacle to bring about sanctification, this spiritually signified a holy purified state (Exodus 29:37). This kind of touching represented the reception of the Divine of the Lord resulting from the communication, transfer and reception of His life into human minds (see *Arcana Coelestia* 10023:5).

It is important to note also that this word for “touch” frequently connects to prohibitions such as touching unclean animals and things such as dead bodies as well as profane kinds of sacrifice (Apocalypse Explained 79). The spiritual meaning of this kind of touch we are told refers to the kind of “contagion” which “infects the soul.” This happens when evils and falsities derived from them are communicated to us by our connections with evil spirits (*Arcana Coelestia* 10130:10). This provides us a stern warning. In the hands of self-serving, morally corrupt influences, the abuse of power with a person's hands and with touch can lead to very bad physical and spiritual outcomes.

Now contrast that kind of touch with the Greek of the NT for touch, “ἅπτομαι [haptomai]” which relates to adhering or fastening oneself to – even clinging to — another person. So when we hear from the Gospels (Mark 10:13-16) that families brought little children

to the Lord “that He might touch them” and “He took them up in His arms, laid His hands on them, and blessed them,” this is a much gentler, more loving kind of touch. A kind of connecting link that exists among angels throughout the Lord’s kingdom and wherever true innocence exists in the natural world.

It is truly wonderful that the Lord has given us the light of the Heavenly Doctrine to unfold the realities of the inner workings of the sense of touch and indeed of all of our physical senses. It might surprise you to conceive of each of our senses – taste, smell, hearing and sight—having some element of the sense of touch – making this special sense a sort of composite of all of them. Listen to this amazing teaching from the *Arcana Coelestia*:

It is not the body which sees, hears, smells, and feels through touch, but a person's spirit. That being so, when the spirit sheds its body it retains the sensory powers it possessed when within the body; indeed these are now far keener. For that which belongs to the body, being coarse compared with that belonging to the spirit, has blunted those sensory powers; and these have been made even blunter because of the person's immersion of them in earthly and worldly interests (4622:3).

Now this notion that our five senses are even keener in the next life should come as no surprise. We sort of expect that the good life, at least the life of heaven will be far more sensational than life in this world. But what is distinctly different in New Church teachings about this is that all of our sensations **IN THIS WORLD** are connected by correspondence to those of our spirit which resides in the spiritual world as we go about our daily lives right here and now. The Writings explain this connection by saying that the senses we have on earth “come forth” from our imperceptible spiritual powers of sensation. We read that our spiritual body feels...

...every sense [to be] more exquisite and more perfect, *because* it is the sense of the internal of a person freed from the external; for the internal is in a more perfect state, because it gives to the external the power of sensation; but when our internal acts into the external, as is the case in the world, internal sensations are dulled and obscured (*Arcana Coelestia* 5078:4).

Although our conscious mind is usually unaware of this inflowing relationship, we are told that all of the physical sensations that reach their various destinations in the human brain are only perceptible to our minds **because** the inner sensory powers of our spirits lie behind our physical ones. This apparent duality of sensation allows for us to live simultaneously in two worlds and to be influenced by angels and spirits who are within our spiritual/our mental sphere.

As mentioned earlier, the Lord has set up His communication network, His ways of touching or communicating with us, with careful oversight of our spiritual freedom. Therefore, while we are subject to the influence of good and evil spirits we have been given the gift of what might be called a sixth sense—a rational mind that can step back from the influences of our senses and predilections in order to make autonomous personal choices which over a lifetime shape the nature of our ruling/dominant love. Although our senses bombard us with volumes of data which sometimes can seem overwhelming, the ones we choose to embrace, foster and so love are the ones which will govern our circle of relationships and connections to eternity.

Returning to earlier examples of the Lord's powerful touch in the Word, did you notice the physical body positions of the people in these accounts? Daniel and John were both *face down* before being Divinely touched and the woman who touched the Lord's garment *bowed down* before Jesus after she was healed. To experience the true joys and healing of the Lord's inflowing, spiritual touch requires humility. It requires a respectful acceptance and acknowledgement that our power and authority is as nothing compared to that of the Infinite God. When we have reached this level of spiritual maturity, we too will find ourselves being lifted up, healed of life's afflictions and given a new and exciting purpose along with deeper pleasures and delights that will make former earthly pleasures seem muted, even trivial.

We began with the inner meaning of "touch". "To touch with the hand is to communicate and transfer to another what pertains to oneself" (*Apocalypse Explained* 79). The Lord demonstrated how sincere, selfless, loving touch is a vehicle for the transfer, the "coming forth" of spiritual power from Him to us. This power of the Lord inflows as Divine truth and Divine love and is unconditional in that it reaches out to all of humanity. "He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5: 45). Yet, the quantity and quality of a person's reception of this empowerment from the Lord is conditioned by the state of the receiving vessels of those whose free will response is essential.

Our senses are essential transmission lines for us to be educated, informed, stimulated, even entertained in countless ways. Without our senses, we have no way to communicate our deepest loves for our spouses, our families and our friends. But these same senses can also be conduits for illusions, fakery, miseducation and evils which must be filtered out. This filtering process is conditional on three things. It is conditional on our humility and willingness to be led by the Word and the Lord. It is conditional on the judicious use of our rational faculties. And is also conditional upon our day to day effort to shun evils as sins so that our loving embraces can be genuine expressions of the Lord's love. Nowhere is this more important than in the chaste and appropriate use of the sense of touch in the ultimate expressions of love in marriage.

May we become as the one with leprosy who came to the Lord with humility, kneeling down, imploring:

"If You are willing [Lord], You can make me clean."

Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed" (Mark 1:40-42).

So let us get in touch and stay in touch with the Lord - read His Word - talk to Him in prayer and do our best to touch the lives of others with kindness and helpfulness. Then we will be opening ourselves in spirit to receive His Divine power and the many blessed states and sensations that He longs to give us.

Amen,

## Readings:

1. But as He went, the multitudes thronged Him. Now a woman, having a flow of blood for twelve years, who had spent all her livelihood on physicians and could not be healed by any, came from behind and touched the border of His garment. And immediately her flow of blood stopped.

And Jesus said, "Who touched Me?"

When all denied it, Peter and those with him said, "Master, the multitudes throng and press You, and You say, 'Who touched Me?' "

But Jesus said, "Somebody touched Me, for I perceived power going out from Me." Now when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before Him, she declared to Him in the presence of all the people the reason she had touched Him and how she was healed immediately. Luke 8: 43-48

2. Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. ...And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, "Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. Revelation 1: 12-18

3. "To touch with the hand" means to communicate and transfer to another what pertains to oneself, and also to receive from another. ...In reference to the Lord, it is to communicate and transfer life such as those have who are in a state of illumination and who see and hear such things as are in heaven. This also took place with John, for he was in such illumination when he saw and heard the things that are described in Revelation. "To touch with the hand" is to communicate and transfer to another, because the whole power of a person is transferred from the body into the hands; consequently what the mind wills that the body should do, that the arms and hands do. Apocalypse Explained 79

4. It should be recognized that the kind of spirits or the kind of angels who are present with us is determined by the nature of what reigns universally in us. The reason for this is that what reigns universally is the being (esse) of anyone's life. All the cheerfulness and all the contentment a person has, even when thinking about other matters, springs from it. For in it the angels and spirits present with us reside and so to speak have a dwelling-place; their gladness enters us and creates that cheerfulness and contentment. Arcana Coelestia 8865:2.