

**Someone told a story of a pastor who was visited in his office by a mother and her nine-year-old boy.** They had requested an urgent appointment because the boy had just been expelled from school. The mother immediately began to share a litany of her son's behavioral problems, including frequent fights with other kids on the playground. The pastor asked the boy what he believed was making him do such things. The boy thought for a while, and then with tears in his eyes said, "I just wish I had a Dad who would put his arms around me once in a while, like my friends have." The pastor got out of his chair, put his arms around the boy and asked, "You mean, like this?" "Yes...yes...yes," the boy kept replying over and over. "Yes, I just want someone to love me," the boy said.

**You can almost be assured that boy's love language was physical touch and that his "love tank" was dangerously empty.**

**Over the last three weeks of Advent we have been exploring and celebrating the nature of God,** more specifically we have been celebrating the fact that whatever love language was required to express love to someone, Jesus used that love language. Out of the five primary love languages, Jesus almost always used the love language of physical touch. Whenever He healed someone, with only a few exceptions, Jesus touched the person, even those considered unclean, such as the leprous.

**Early studies show the importance of physical touch.** The history of orphanages demonstrated the importance of picking up babies, holding and cuddling them, and saying all those silly words. Without hands-on-care, some children even died, not for lack of nutritional food but emotional love. The person whose primary language is physical touch has his "love tank" filled with a hug, kiss, or slap on the shoulder, or a back rub. The sixteen-year-old who challenges his dad to a wrestling match has a desire for physical touch. The seventy-year-old woman living in a convalescent home goes twice a week to the beautician because she wants more than her hair fixed; she wants someone to touch her.

**Jesus often shared His love with physical touch.** The Gospel of Mark records that He took children into His arms and blessed them. Thinking Jesus was too busy, the disciples rebuked the people. Jesus in turn rebuked the disciples saying, "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." Then He took the children in His arms and blessed them (Mk. 10:15-16). In healing the blind man, Jesus touched the man's eyes. A leper came to Him, beseeching Him and falling on His knees, begged for healing, and "filled with compassion, Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man" (Mk. 1:41). Can you imagine? Lepers were the last persons anyone would want to touch, with their open sores covered by dirty bandages. Certainly one of the most memorable of times when Jesus touched someone was when He washed the feet of the disciples. Upon washing them, He dried each man's feet with a towel. (The pitcher and towel displayed on the altar this morning symbolizes for us this act of love.)

**Mother Teresa touched people spiritually, emotionally and physically.** When she invited others to join her in her ministry, one person said, "I couldn't do what you're doing for a million dollars." She replied by saying, "Neither would I...I wouldn't do it for 2 million dollars. I do it gladly for the love of God."

**It may seem a bit out of order to consider the text we do on this Sunday, the Sunday before the celebration of Christmas;** however, a closer look might help us see how appropriate it is. We all know the story well. The prodigal son had decided he wanted his share of the inheritance to spend however he wished. His father reluctantly conceded to his request. In a short period of time, the son had wasted his money and discovered that the other side of the street wasn't as wonderful as he expected. His father missed him terribly and patiently waited daily for his return. The text records the scene: "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate" (Lk. 15:20-24).

**And so we return to Christmas and its message—a message of forgiveness through the Christ Child—the Son of God—the Messiah.** We celebrate this season...this warm embrace of our Father. God steps down from heaven and presents the world with Himself in the flesh and dwells with us...to touch us with His love. We kill "the fattened calf...have a feast and celebrate" because salvation has come, because that which "was dead ... is alive again." (v. 24). Christmas is a time of celebration...celebration of the gift of salvation brought to us by Jesus in the manger.

**And in this season of Christmas, we embrace one another, expressing our love, just as the earthly father expressed his love for his son.** We embrace one another here in anticipation of embracing one another someday in heaven itself—heaven earned for us by the Christmas Child. We welcome one another with greetings and best wishes, because, despite our disagreements and quarrels, we are one in Christ, forgiven and forgiving. "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy" (Titus 3:4-5).

**In the story of the prodigal son we need to remember that you and I are the boy.** However, when we are at home with God through faith in Jesus Christ, we are commissioned, authorized to conduct the Father's business. We confess our failure to do so. Too often, our business is more important. Christmas love—Jesus, the Messiah—brings us a word of promise, a word of forgiveness for our failure to do His business. And yes, we bathe in the forgiveness and restoration He brings to us this morning through Word and Sacrament. Our prayer is that through His Spirit we might this Christmas share His love by sharing the message of Christmas with others through time, affirmation, acts of service, gifts...and yes, with touch. **In this week of Christmas, as we declare His love with our touch, we become His priests.**

**As we gather with our loved ones, and embrace each other in greeting, we become His physicians**—physicians because we know that physical touch actually offers health. Dr. Dolores Krieger has made numerous studies on the effects of laying on of hands. What she discovered is that hemoglobin levels in both the giver and the receivers' bloodstreams go up during the act of the laying on of hands. As hemoglobin levels are invigorated, body tissues receive more oxygen which helps people stay healthier.

**Marilyn Monroe recalled that one of the few times she felt loved was when she was seven or eight and a woman touched her cheeks.** “The woman I was living with was putting on makeup, and I was watching her. She was in a happy mood, so she reached over and patted my cheeks with her rouge puff....For that moment, I felt loved by her.” It was a small act, but Marilyn remembered it was like pouring buckets of love and security on her parched life starving for affection. As we greet one another with warm handshakes, we become God’s ambassadors in sharing His love.

**On Christmas Eve, our heavenly Father encircled the world with His arms of love and placed in a manger in Bethlehem His Son in order to redeem mankind from, sin, death, and the power of the devil.** In this week of Christmas, let us make every effort to share this Christmas love with touch...a kiss...an arm around another’s shoulder...a firm handshake...a hug.... These are the signs of Christmas and spell out to the surrounding world Christmas love.