

"The Touchstone" A sermon based on Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 103, and Luke 13:10-17 delivered by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan on Sunday, August 24, 2025.

A touchstone is a black silicone stone, somewhat like flint, which was used to check the purity of gold and silver by the streak left on the stone when rubbed by the metal. Thus, a touchstone, is anything by which a thing's true quality is tested. So, touch is a very powerful thing. In our Jeremiah passage this morning—touch is everything! When God touches Jeremiah's mouth, it is not just a small thing, for God goes on to say that in that touch are God's very own pure words! Touch conjures up memories and makes connections for us that we cannot make so easily from other sources—from hearing someone else's description of something, for instance, or from receiving touch secondhand. How many times have you said to someone you are visiting with who will be seeing someone else that you care about, "Hug So-and-so for me when you see them" and in saying it you are trying to provide a touchstone of your affection secondhand to that person—by touch--and yet you know full well that it is not the same as being there yourself—nothing can replace your own personal touch. During the pandemic we all keenly felt this type of “second hand” touch, and we know just how unsatisfactory it became. Well Jesus knew this, and he also knew that the touch which the disciples would eventually experience from his resurrected body, would have to be passed on secondhand to the generations to follow.

He knew that in order for us to believe on him, to use him as a touchstone, we would have to be convinced of this by the witness of the apostles. This is where the Gospels come in. In our Luke passage this morning, we see a perfect example of this. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue. He is obviously seen as a person of authority, if he is allowed to perform this rabbinic office. And, when he sees the bent over woman, crippled for eighteen years, he immediately reaches out to touch her and heal her, even though he knows he will face opposition from the leader of the synagogue because he had performed this work of healing on the Sabbath—how could he even touch a woman in public, let alone heal her!

In a 1997 article in the Christian Century magazine entitled "Touch and See," Lutheran pastor F. Dean Lueking speaks to this power of touch. He says "touch nurtures" and goes on to use the illustration of a mother's touch, from being enfolded in her womb, to being breastfed, consoled as a teenager, and patted on the back on commencement day. He says "touch reconciles" and goes on to speak of the once loving couple who came to him for counseling and who through their difficulties cannot touch each other, but who can allow him, a mediator and representative of the Risen Christ, to touch both of their hands and bring their hands together in prayer. Rev. Lueking also says "touch points us to the future" when we will find our own fulfillment in the embrace of the Risen Christ after our own deaths. But, he also cautions

that before then, we must touch others in Christ's name—we must use our hands in Christ's place—as a touchstone for others—to feed the hungry, reach the imprisoned, clothe the naked, and heal the sick, by our own touch. He also warns us not to take this touch for granted—and sites the farewell of visitors with inmates at prisons—when he says “I see what happens when a visitor leaves the visited. Each places a hand to the glass partition separating them, longing to touch but unable to do so. Seeing that moves me not to take for granted the freedom to clasp another's hand in the daily rounds of life.” And, finally, he says “Touch sanctifies memory” — if what the church calls “apostolic succession” actually means anything, it is the touch of the Resurrected Christ, passed down from those first disciples from generation to generation, through Baptism and the Lord's supper, and the touch of—human hands in the “laying on of hands” passed on and on through time.

The power of this type of touchstone, as passed on through the biblical witness, and of touch itself, was brought home to me recently while re-viewing the 1994 movie Nell. In this movie, starring Jodie Foster, as Nell, and Liam Neeson, as Jerry, a doctor who discovered her in a backwoods cabin where he came because her mother had been found dead. We see the story of an isolated girl unfolding—one who speaks her own unintelligible, it seems, language. Thinking that her mother, who lived as a hermit in the backwoods of North Carolina,

had lived alone following a withdrawal from society due to being raped as a young woman, Liam Neeson goes to the cabin to pronounce the woman dead and discovers, much to his surprise, her daughter--scared to death moaning and screaming and hiding in the rafters of the cabin. Looking around for some sort of explanation—he comes upon a family Bible, much dogeared, and a note which asks who ever finds it to "Take care of Nell, Good child."

Taking the Bible and other pieces of information from the cabin—he goes back to town to try to figure out what to do. Following this a poignant drama unfolds as society says that Nell needs to "be taken care of" and Jerry insists that she be left alone to live the life that she knows so well in the cabin. The movie is worth seeing again and again and I hope you do see it if you haven't already had the privilege, but I just, want to share a snippet with you. It turns out that Nell is the surviving half of a pair of identical twin girls—her idiosyncratic speech is a combination of a private twin language and the fact that her mother had had many strokes and spoke through aphasia. But the most striking part of the movie is the place that touch plays in the life of this young woman. When she touches a mirror image of herself, she is able to conjure up the happy and joyous memories of her life with her twin sister. They hold each other's hands and spin around and around in imitation of "trees in the win." When she feels the sun coming in the windows of the cabin she closes her eyes in order to really feel the

touch of the sun on her face, and she smiles in recognition of the touch of the divine in that sun. When she sees worry lines on the people who become her friends over the course of the film, she gently touches their faces to smooth them away, and coos in a soothing voice as she does so. Her speech, which at first seems incomprehensible, becomes increasingly understandable at each touch, and the "experts" finally realize that she is actually speaking English but is dropping consonants in imitation of the slurred speech of her aphasic mother.

About this time, things become crazy, because Nell has discovered that some of the things in the cabin are missing—she shouts and throws things and desperately searches the cabin—when Jerry finally calms her and asks what is wrong, she points under the table where the Bible is supposed to be and says the "Word of the Lord," the "Word of the Lord." He quickly realizes that she means the Bible and he brings it back with apologies for taking it. She then asks him to "speak" it to her, and he reads to her from Isaiah, where the place has been marked. She obviously has memorized these words and speaks them along with him. It soon becomes obvious to the audience and to Jerry, that a deep faith in God, the touchstone of which is this family Bible, has been passed on to Nell from her mother, and that she is much more sophisticated and mature in her thoughts and actions than they had thought before while they were observing her through societal blinders as a guinea pig.

For Nell, as for us, there is nothing for it but for us to have a secondhand faith, a secondhand touch. But, if we can come to this faith, like she did, with the childlike assurance and knowledge that, even though secondhand, our touchstone, our claim to authenticity, is the Risen Christ, whose touch has been passed down through prophets and Psalmists and generations and generations of disciples, then the church and the Christian faith will survive.

Nell cries out for "the word of the Lord"--a sure touchstone--in times of despair and trouble—a comfort through the grief of the death of her mother and of her twin sister years before who, "walks with the Lord," as she tells Jerry. And in her crying out we are touched by her witness to faith. Will others be touched by our individual witnesses to that faith? God touched Jeremiah's lips and he was then able to preach, and to "build and to plant;" the Psalmist tells us that through the Lord's steadfast love "our youth will be renewed like the eagles;" Jesus touched the bent over woman and she was finally able to meet the world face to face. Who will our faith touch and make a difference in their lives? Who will be able to meet the Lord face to face because of our testimony? If we could wake up each morning asking this question and be determined to answer it through our caring actions, we might even become prophets, like Jeremiah, and help others find their very own "touchstone!" Amen.

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