

Thomas and Touch

Thomas had to touch. The word of others would not do. He had not only to see for himself, but had to touch Jesus, to assure himself that everyone was not just seeing things, allaying their grief by wishful thinking.

Unlike Thomas we cannot touch these days. But the human body needs touch. A baby left untouched will wither and die. But we must remain apart these days. So while we cannot physically touch one another, say, at the kiss of peace at Mass, we can and do need to brainstorm creative ways of remaining in touch with each other. Sherry Turkle, professor of Science, Technology and Society at MIT, wrote a critique of social media a couple of years ago entitled "Alone Together." She argued that social media was no substitute for human touch. We are learning today just how true that is. But while social media is no substitute for human touch, it can supplement it, and today it can sustain us through this time apart.

It makes me wonder. The last great pandemic, the 1918 swine flu epidemic, killed more people than the World War that had just ended. Estimates range from 50 to 100 million worldwide. It makes me wonder the extent to which that unimaginable body count was not in part a function of people needing to stay in touch with each other, breaking quarantine from time to time, in an era when the only way to be in touch was to touch. Sure, telephones had already been invented, but voices over the phone still sounded phony, facial expression and body language remained absent, and phone lines were party lines inhibiting intimacy.

When the Risen Jesus first appeared to his disciples the first thing he told them was "Be not afraid." For they were afraid, in hiding lest what had happened to Jesus might now happen to them. And when Jesus did appear, I suspect they were also afraid of him. Afraid that he had returned to punish them for their having abandoned him in their moment of need.

But Jesus did not come to punish. He came to restore his relationship with them, to touch their hearts and to rouse their spirits. He came to touch them and to send them forth, to the ends of the earth, to touch others with the word and the power of the Gospel.

While we cannot touch, thanks to the internet we are equally in touch with one another across the globe. Anyone in the world is but a mouse click away. Social critics, including Turkle, worry that social media has become a scourge. But I cannot imagine having to remain in place without being able to remain in touch with others, family and friends, neighbors and colleagues. Social media is no substitute for hugs, but it can sustain us, until we can once more share a kiss of peace.