

The human body is amazing. In Psalm 139, David praises God saying,

'I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.' (Psalm 139:14)

God gave us all our senses and for this study we are going to look at the sense of touch. Medically speaking the sense of touch is part of our body's 'somatosensory' system. This not only detects touch or pressure, but its receptors and transmitters are also responsible for the feelings of heat and cold, and of pain, which includes itch and tickle sensations too. It is our somatosensory system that also detects muscle and joint movement, helps us hold our posture and, maybe surprisingly, gives us our facial expressions. Did you know that the human body can detect pressure on the skin at 0.00004 inches? That's incredibly light!

Part of our somatosensory system is the network of nerves throughout our bodies, and this is broken down into the central nervous system and the peripheral nervous system. It's this peripheral nervous system that allows us to experience touch. At The Leprosy Mission we talk a lot about nerves, as leprosy damages nerve endings and can cause those affected by the disease to lose their sense of touch.

Another way to think about touch is to think about the world that we live in and the different things that we can physically feel.

Activity

Have a quick look around the room you are in now and make a quick note of all the different textures surrounding you. Get up and feel them if you want to! Spend a few minutes talking about the blessings of touch and give some examples. What are some of the downsides of touch?

Read Genesis 27:1-24

One of the earliest stories in the Bible is the story of Esau and Jacob receiving (or failing to receive) their father's blessing.

Discussion

- How many of the five senses play an important part in this story?
- Why is Isaac's sense of touch so important to him? What are some of the ways that impaired senses, perhaps because of age, makes life increasingly difficult?

Springing forward into the New Testament we read in the Gospels many incidents of Jesus reaching out and touching people.

Read Mark 1: 40 – 45

In this story we read of Jesus healing a man with leprosy. The passage comes at the beginning of Mark's Gospel in amongst a number of stories of Jesus healing people who have come to him for help. It is only in this story that Mark states how Jesus heals the man; he reached out and touched him.

Discussion

- Why do you think Mark is specific about how Jesus healed the man with leprosy?
- Try to imagine yourself into the leprosy sufferer's position. What impact do you think the way Jesus touched him had on him?

On another occasion we read of a woman who had suffered terribly with bleeding and she knew that if she could get close to Jesus and touch him, she would be healed.

Read Mark 5: 25 – 34

Discussion

- What do you think compelled this woman to touch Jesus' clothes?
- Was it the physical touch of her hand to Jesus' clothes or her faith that Jesus could heal her that made her well again?

Of course not all touch is perceived as good, in Luke 7 we read of a woman anointing Jesus with her tears and with expensive perfume, and those looking on are not impressed at all. They reckon that if Jesus really is a prophet sent from God he would know this woman is a sinner and would not want her to be touching him.

Read Luke 7:36-47

Discussion

- Why is it so important for the woman to touch Jesus?
- Why do you think Jesus allows this to happen, particularly in front of a large crowd?

Activity

We started to think about leprosy at the beginning of this study, and the way in which it takes away a person's ability to feel things with their hands and feet. Imagine for a moment that you have no feeling in your hands. What can you now no longer do? How about your feet, imagine you have lost the sensation there, what do you now struggle with?

Someone who has leprosy may not be able to feel that a fire is hot or that a knife is sharp. They may not be able to feel a thorn in their sole which can fester and become a pus-oozing ulcer. And on the other side, consider too that they may not be able to feel their child's skin or to feel the sensation of holding hands with their husband or wife. These are much more personal things, less practical and some might say unnecessary, but that human touch is a way of communicating love and affection that leprosy can take away.

Human touch is a very important thing; remember when the 33 miners in Chile were rescued after 69-70 days trapped underground? The first thing they wanted to do was hug their loved ones, to hold their babies and children, to have that affectionate touch that they had lived without for more than two months. It may have been more important to them than food and water at that moment.

When someone is diagnosed with leprosy it is quite common that those around them will be scared and may stop all physical contact for fear of catching the disease themselves. That person can then go for many years without something as simple as a handshake, let alone a hug. That's why the work of people like Sister Bera, who works at Purulia Hospital in West Bengal, India, is so important. Whenever she is doing her rounds she makes a point of hugging the patients or touching their shoulders. If they are a youngster she may give them a little rub on the head. She does this because she understands how important human touch is to someone who has been without it for so long. She really is modelling Jesus here on earth as she reaches out in love to those affected by leprosy.

Discussion

- Can you think of times when human contact has been special to you? How could you use touch to be a blessing to others?

If we desire to take our relationship deeper with God then we could think about our five senses and how we can use them to worship him and also to build up his kingdom.

Discussion

- How do you think your God-given sense of touch can be used in worship him and serve him?

To finish

A prayer:

Heavenly Father, we thank you that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made", yet all different and all in your image. We thank you for the intricate web of nerves that we have all over our bodies allowing us to touch, feel and hold things. Help us to appreciate how special this is and what a privilege it is to interact with the world around us by using our sense of touch. Help us to use this gift of touch to worship and serve you, and show your love to those around us day by day. Amen