

# Story and Meditation: Soft Shoulder

April 11, 2021

Acts 4:32-35

John 20:19-31

by *Eric Anderson*

The sun was having a problem. It was extending its love to its children, the planets, and the planets weren't responding the way it thought they should.

The sun had given birth to the planets at about the same time it had been born itself. As gravity brought together bits of star-stuff, most of the bits – nearly all the bits, to be truthful – had come together in one steadily growing place. When there were enough bits, the gravity started to bring some of the bits so close together that they became bigger bits, and when they became bigger bits, they produced light and heat and those blazing fires of the sun.

The planets formed in much the same way. Lighting those fires had blown some of the bits out away from the sun itself, joining the other bits that were gradually clumping together to become rocky bits, and watery bits, and airy bits – although rocky and watery and airy could be very different in these clumpy bits. After some time which you and I would consider a long time there were lots of clumpy bits circling around the sun at the center, and nine larger globes of bits that we call the planets, except that some call Pluto a planet and some call it a dwarf planet, but Pluto knows what it is and as far as I know isn't sulking about it.

I hope.

The sun looked out at all these planets and loved them like children. And how do you love your children? One way is to touch them. So the sun summoned up its light and heat and cast it out into space where it could touch the planets. And that's where the problems began.

Pluto, making its 248 year journey around the sun, barely felt anything at all. It thought the sun might be waving to it, so it winked back as best it could, reflecting the sun's light back but so faintly that the sun only glimpsed it from time to time. The other outer planets were bigger closer and could wink a little brighter, but they were still pretty dark and cold.

Jupiter, of course, has a big red spot on it. Do you suppose that could be the planet in the middle of a long, slow wink?

Mercury, on the other hand, was feeling a little too much of the love. The blast of light and heat from the nearby sun dazed it so much that it ended up turning very slowly, so that a day on Mercury lasts for two Mercury years. Talk about long days and long nights.

Venus, just a little further out, shrouded herself in clouds to protect herself from all that light and heat, and ended up creating an even hotter furnace.

All in all, things weren't going as the sun had hoped. Except for Earth. Earth basked in the sunlight like, well, a human being on a beach in the sun. "Why are you so happy?" asked the sun.

"You've given me a touch that suits me well," said Earth. "You're not baking me, and you're not so far off I can't feel you. It's just the right touch."

The sun could only wish that it could touch the other planets the same as Earth, but to this day they keep their distance as they do, and only the Earth receives just the right touch.

When I arrived in Hawai'i five years ago – five years and a week ago – I had to re-learn how to hug. Church culture in Connecticut, despite what you may have heard about the formality of New Englanders, includes a fair amount of hugging. Pre-pandemic, that is. It's such a part of UCC church culture that we had to think carefully about hugging in settings with a lot of children around, children who might not want a hug or who might not feel safe with some kinds of hugs. Sunday School, summer camp, and youth program leaders all learned to ask before extending a hug.

Part of the reason for this is the nature of the New England hug. It's a pretty big one. The arms go around the back and the feet come close together. That's a lot of closeness.

It's also completely different from the hug of greeting here in Hawai'i.

Hawaiians greet strangers with a hug, which isn't common in Connecticut, but the physical contact is very different. Here the hands go to the shoulders, not around the back, and the feet stay further apart. That limits the body contact and proximity.

I made a few mistakes about this until I figured out the difference. Like the sun and the planets, I had to find the touch that was comfortable and comforting for those I greeted and those greeting me. Like the sun, I wanted to find the distance that nurtured an Earth, rather than a distance that baked a Mercury or froze a Pluto.

Thomas, in his disappointment and frustration at not seeing the risen Jesus, demanded not only that he see Jesus but also touch him in a really invasive and offensive way: to place his fingers in the crucifixion wounds. The only thing that makes the demand slightly less scandalous is that he didn't really believe it when he said it, but imagine the horror of his friends to hear it.

I read it and hear some of Thomas' yearning, not to believe in Jesus' resurrection, but to touch him again.

Dacher Keltner writes in Greater Good Magazine, “There are studies showing that touch signals safety and trust, it soothes. Basic warm touch calms cardiovascular stress. It activates the body’s vagus nerve, which is intimately involved with our compassionate response, and a simple touch can trigger release of oxytocin...” Touch calms people in stressful situations, stimulates more compassionate responses, and in one study, even changes the outcome of sports tournaments. Writes Dr. Keltner: “In a recent study out of my lab, published in the journal *Emotion* we found that, in general, NBA basketball teams whose players touch each other more win more games.” That was in 2010, by the way.

It's one of the stresses we have felt during this pandemic, isn't it? Again according to studies by Dr. Keltner, Americans on the continent tend to touch each other markedly less than people in France or Puerto Rico. I'm sure the research would have shown higher levels of touch in Hawai'i as well – until this pandemic. For a year now, we have struggled to communicate compassion by not touching one another, and it's a strain. We don't feel like our compassion is felt. We don't feel like we're feeling the love.

As April is Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Month, however, we also need to face the reality that some touch burns. It hurts. It scars. Touch without permission. Touch that is invasive. Touch that is violent. It happens to children. It happens to women. It happens to men. It happens to far too many people in far too many places and sometimes, like Thomas, we insist upon it not quite realizing what we're demanding.

We don't wait for Jesus to offer the invitation – an invitation that I'm sure Thomas realized in that moment was one he could turn down.

We are scarred for the lack of touch – and some are scarred for the harshness of touch.

Cheryl Lindsay writes at ucc.org, “A scar doesn't need to be healed, it's the mark where healing took place. Our scars should be a badge of honor that we show so that someone will know what we've been through, that we've made it, and we're healed.”

In 2018, Stephan Pastis drew three panels for his comic strip, *Pearls Before Swine*. In the first panel, we find Rat and Pig walking down a road, where they see a yellow caution sign “Soft Shoulder.” In the next panel, they see a man or boy leaning his head on the shoulder of a taller woman, who says, “There, there, sweetheart... The world's a tough place right now, but everything will be OK.”

In the last panel, Pig says to Rat, “We need more of those.”

On that Sunday one week after the first Easter, the Thomas who had demanded a touch that he should not have demanded was offered a soft shoulder, an assurance that everything was OK, that everything would be OK. He demanded the moon, and was given the stars.

As we emerge gradually from this pandemic, may we rediscover the joy, the comfort, and the sustenance of human touch once more. Even before then, however, may we be assured of the constant touch of Jesus deep within our spirits. There is our ultimate soft shoulder. There is our “more of those.” There is our hope and our help.

Thomas demanded the moon, and he and you and I have been given the stars.

Amen.