



By Graham Ashby

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For over fifteen years now my wife and I have been involved in conducting Growing Great Relationship Seminars. If you have ever attended, you will know that we highly recommend Dr Gary Chapman's best-selling book, 'The Five Love Languages.' Like Dr Chapman, we recognise that every relationship needs to understand the love language that enables a person to thrive. In this best-selling book, Dr Chapman presents the idea that human beings are wired differently for love and after 20 years of working with couples, he identified five ways people express and receive love;

- 1. Words of Affirmation**
- 2. Acts of Service**
- 3. Gift-giving and receiving**
- 4. Physical Touch and Closeness**
- 5. Quality Time**

I am not going to explain each 'love language' but will make the point that Dr Chapman emphasizes on almost every page, and that is; everyone has a specific love language and if they receive that love language they will flourish. Likewise, if they are deprived of it, great damage can happen with their perception of what true love is. To illustrate, if a person has as their primary love language 'Quality Time,' they thrive when they have good company. If that same person is isolated and does not experience quality time they could suffer emotionally. And, if someone loves being hugged, embraced and kissed, it is highly probable their love language is Physical Touch and Closeness. If that person is separated from the touches of physical affirmation they run the risk of being sad and anxious.

Dr Chapman believes that every human being has a primary love (fuel) tank. Fill that love tank with the right fuel and they will respond with love. However, fill that love tank with the wrong fuel and they will falter and grind to a halt. Understanding Dr Chapman's premise is a positive and powerful way of growing every relationship, be it, in marriage, family, work environment and church relationships.

Spare a thought for all those among us right now who are extroverts and for people enduring this lockdown whose love language is Physical Touch and Closeness. If alone, it must be extra hard for them as under duress, they do not mix, move or touch those they love. The government, in wanting to protect its citizens has imposed an obligatory isolation requirement that they have termed as social distancing. In

other words, to stop the coronavirus from spreading we must avoid making physical contact with other human beings. This has resulted in most businesses, all schools, all events, all weddings, all funerals and all churches being closed for the time being because those are the places where touch happens the most. People who love to be hugged, shake hands and rub shoulders with family and friends could most likely feel totally unloved right now. The uncertainty of not physically being held, because of this lockdown period, can cause stress and angst and I'm informed that Counsellors are already preparing for a surge in clients needing reassurance that they are still loved when the lockdown is lifted.

In most societies touch is incorporated into their way of social greetings: The Europeans value embracing and kissing on cheeks. In the middle East it is common to be hugged, given a handshake and be kissed, sometimes multiple times. In the far East, people bow and every now and then grasp prayer shaped hands. In the West, we mostly shake hands and hug when appropriate. In Maoridom the hongī (nose to nose), is the culturally accepted way of greeting each other. Touch is an essential way of communicating acceptance and love in most communities.

Of course, we have also learnt that there are inappropriate ways to touch people. The great cry coming out of the #MeToo movement has correctly been that people are not sexual objects to be harassed and abused. It breaks my heart to know that children, women and men have had their purity violated by others with an inappropriate touch. The more we learn of such cases the more society acts with suspicion and trust is lost. Yet, so great is the need for touch that instinctively, when lives fall apart, we hug each other. This seems a strange dichotomy but it reveals that in a time of adversity, we all need to feel the touch of love.

This is powerfully displayed by Jesus every time He reached out and touched the lepers, the lame, the blind, the social rejects and even the dead. In Bible times society kept its distance from those who were sick beyond repair. Sinners like tax-collectors and prostitutes were also considered as social outcasts because of their despicable lifestyles. Yet, time and time again, we read of Jesus entering their confinement and allowing Himself to be so close, they could physically touch Him.

Likewise, Jesus rejected no one, and he personally touched;

- the blind men (Matthew 9:29),
- the leper (Mark 1:41),
- the boy with an evil spirit (Mark 9:27),
- the widow's dead son (Luke 7:14)
- and the crippled woman (Luke 13:13),

On each occasion, Jesus would deliberately, purposely, reach out and touch these desperately needy people who for so long felt rejected and unloved. Can you imagine, that apart from the miracle of healing that took place, and that would have been overwhelming in itself, that suddenly,

- those seeing blind men,
- that healed leper,
- that restored boy,
- that alive widow's son
- and that now walking crippled woman,

would feel more loved than they had ever felt in their lives because Jesus had touched them? Whenever Jesus touches a life, he imparts God's sincere, redemptive, restorative, gracious, merciful love.

I submit to you that during that dark first Easter Friday, when He was on the Cross, despite the social distancing and the brutal death that Jesus was experiencing, He was in fact drawing all men to Himself. Isaiah (ch. 53) shockingly described it when he foretold what would happen; *"He took on our infirmities and carried our sorrows, was stricken by God, smitten and afflicted, as He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, punished and wounded for us...that by his wounds we are healed."*

That was the day, we have discovered since, when heaven touched the earth with love as earth touched heaven with the blood of Christ. That day was the day we discovered God's love language to us was revealed through His Son. *"For God so loved the world He gave His one and only Son..."* (John 3:16). Easter Friday was when Jesus touched every sinner's life by offering to take the punishment for every sin (1 Peter 3:18). Our response to this great demonstration of love will determine not just our eternal future; *"...so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16), but how, Christ's love can touch others through us.

In addition to the wonder of the Cross is the power of the resurrection. It is because Jesus rose from the grave, victorious over sin, death and hell, that we can confidently touch others with the truth of our living Saviour.

Right now, because of our social-distancing and limited physical church connections, we might think we cannot get the Easter message out there. It would be a mistake to think this way. The Gospel can never be contained. Historically, Rome tried that and failed! In the case of the Gospel, the message is far greater than the messenger. The Gospel is supposed to be community transmitted! Just because we have not met together for Easter services does not mean we limit the spread and celebration of Easter.

Over the last few weeks, intuitively, many churches have spread the Good News of Easter digitally via social media, videos and mail-drops (The Hope Project). Families and individuals have taken communion together in homes, some have joined other groups via Skype, Zoom and other platforms. Crosses have been appearing in windows. God's message and God's love is being shared!

Easter may have just passed but that does not mean we stop sharing the love of Christ. Churches may be shut but hearts are still open. We may not get visitors but we can visit homes with prayer. Physical touch is very limited right now but we can touch a life through a phone call, a txt, an email, and even the beauty of a handwritten letter. God's arms are not too short to save (Is. 59:1) so be very assured that He can still touch many lives through the Body of Christ as we touch them from our secluded homes.

Technology will never replace true connections and real relationships. Virtual hugs, smiley faces, thumbs up, hearts and kisses are poor substitutes for the real thing but right now that is all we can do. Even though we can not physically connect we can spiritually connect. Social distancing is the opposite of what the church is called to do but right now we comply because it is in the best interest of all New Zealanders to do so. We will come back and reach out because we love contact, we cherish community, we thrive when we are together and we value being face to face. What do we do in the meantime? We do something that the New Testament tells us to do that involves touch – we **HOLD ON**. This little phrase is mentioned over twenty times in the New Testament and it implies; if Jesus has touched our lives, then we must hold on

to Him. To put it another way, without losing the meaning, **WE EMBRACE our Lord and His Words** to get us through this time. Do you want to feel the touch of Jesus in your life? Do you want to feel physically and spiritually close to your Lord? Then, reach out, embrace your Lord, take a grip and *“Hold on to what you have until I come”* (Rev. 2:25).

Peace to your hearts

Blessings

Graham

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "GRAHAM". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line underneath it.

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