The Role of Touch in Comprehending Love: Jesus’s Foot Washing in John 13

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ABSTRACT

When Jesus humbly washes his disciples’ feet (John 13), he engages his friends up close using the sense of touch. This article explores how his touch conveys a quality of love that no other physical sense can capture. Sensory Anthropology reveals how touch is often overlooked and undervalued but is quite potent. We confronted these dynamics most recently when the pandemic reversed our cultural rules around touch: almost overnight, touch became dangerous and distance a kindness. This rule-reversal proves analogous for our exploration of the foot washing. By employing Affect Theory, this study draws on these pandemic experiences alongside two tactile exchanges in the Fourth Gospel (John 9, 12) to examine how Jesus’s touch in the foot washing overturns the “rules” to convey a unique quality of love.

KEYWORDS

foot washing, touch, tactile, Sensory Anthropology, Affect Theory

Introduction

This article examines the role that the sense of touch plays when Jesus washes the feet of his disciples in John 13. Johannine scholarship has widely observed the radical humility of this gesture, as Jesus upsets societal norms in this profound expression of service.¹ But as Jan Van der Watt recently suggested, it is inadequate to conclude that by this act Jesus is implying merely that his disciples should become like slaves. By exploring ancient social

practices of washing feet and relating it to this context, he argues that Jesus illustrates “the nature of intense love” by this foot washing. In agreement with his conclusion, this article builds on it. In the following I suggest that the sense of touch involved in this foot washing contributes a particular quality of knowledge that helps explicate this intense love. If the efficacy of touch in such an exchange were ever in question, our global society’s 2020 encounter with COVID–19 resolves it: touch matters. Reflecting on how a pandemic has removed touch from our normal social rhythms will help us explore how the foot washing introduces touch to convey a particular quality of love.

**Bodies Know**

The suggestion that touch conveys love rests upon recent decades of scholarship across several disciplines which highlights the role of embodiment—including the physical senses—in how we come to “know” something. Thus, instead of conceiving of knowledge in purely mental, epistemic terms—a post-Enlightenment inclination which led to the division and elevation of mind over body—this embodied quality of knowledge understands the mind as inextricable from the body’s interaction with the world. As Jennifer Glancy has stated about body knowledge, “we know the world as mediated through our own corporal narratives.” Neuroscience affirms the concept of embodied knowledge with findings demonstrating that “categorical knowledge is grounded in sensory-motor regions of the brain,” ultimately supporting the idea that such knowledge “is not amodal.” This “intense love” conveyed by the foot washing through touch, I suggest,

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3 The research for this article was prompted by and conducted during the initial months of the global lockdown (March 2020). While studying the touch of the foot washing, the sudden removal of touch from everyday life brought new insights to these reflections. Findings from a recent study conducted during the pandemic reveal that touch impacts mental health. After surveying 1746 participants experiencing COVID–19-restrictions (e.g., social distancing and touch deprivation), the study revealed the positive impact that social and intimate touch has, while touch deprivation tended to lead to higher anxiety and greater loneliness (Mariana von Mohr, Louise Kirsch, and Alkaterini Fotopoulou, “Social Touch Deprivation during COVID–19: Effects on Psychological Wellbeing and Craving Interpersonal Touch,” *Royal Society Open Science* 8 (2021): doi:10.1098/rsos.210287). See also Richard Kearney, *Touch: Recovering our Most Vital Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), for a stimulating exploration of touch and timely reflections on how the pandemic heightened the importance of this subject.

4 Raymond Gibbs, *Embodiment and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9–10. See also George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 17, “There is no such fully autonomous faculty of reason separate from and independent of bodily capacities such as perception and movement.”


6 Lawrence Barsalou (in “Perceptual Symbol Systems,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 22 [1999]: 579, doi:10.1017/S0140525X99002149) explains how damage to a sensory-motor region in the brain...
involves a quality of knowledge that cannot be mediated by any other physical sense.

Applying a sensory focus to texts has been an increasing approach within biblical studies toward uncovering greater descriptive value. In recent years, scholars like Dorothy Lee, Louise Lawrence, Rainer Hirsch-Luipold, Sunny Wang, Meredith Warren, Josaphat Tam, Dominika Kurek-Chomycz, and most recently Deborah Forger, have addressed various sensory elements within the Fourth Gospel specifically.\(^7\) Increasingly, sensory approaches to the biblical text are making use of Sensory Anthropology,\(^8\) an emerging collaborative discipline drawing on fields like anthropology, sociology, and cultural history to explore how other cultures variously classify and value the senses.\(^9\) Such sensory approaches shine light on the often-overlooked senses (like touch), by exploring the senses’ function and operation within a particular scene (such as the foot washing).

This study takes an eclectic methodological approach to the Fourth Gospel narrative, making heuristic use of several disciplinary tools to explicate the tactile dynamics of the text. First, Sensory Anthropology will describe the cultural relativity of the senses, locating the position of touch in its commonly obscured place within the sensorium; we see this dynamic in both the modern West and the ancient world. Despite a society’s tendency to obscure or demote touch, touch retains important value. As we will see, the same dynamics which determine and maintain touch’s low rank are also those which contribute to touch’s potency for the foot washing scene. Second, empirical insights from neurobiology and neuroscience will bolster the claim that well-intended


\(^8\) E.g., Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012); Louise Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma*. Sensory Anthropology also incorporates various scientific disciplines and findings. While the senses are largely culturally determined, scientific research does carry importance toward understanding the senses. Thus, scientific findings must be nuanced alongside the reality that cultures understand and value the senses in certain ways.
touch can convey a particular quality of love.\textsuperscript{10}

Finally, I will employ Affect Theory, a discipline utilising the modern embodied experience as an entrée into the question of how a text may have been “emotionally and physically persuasive” to an ancient reader.\textsuperscript{11} Drawing on modern tactile experience is one way of opening a channel by which we can understand how the tactile, affective qualities of a narrative text convey love. While Amy Cottrill observes how we cannot draw a “direct line” between the bodily reactions of modern and ancient readers, it is true that “none of us leave our bodies behind when we encounter other cultural worlds.”\textsuperscript{12} Using this framework, I will explore how our recent embodied experience with touch during the COVID–19 pandemic opens a path by which we can uncover the tactile qualities conveyed by the narrative to ancient readers.

This study will begin with preliminary insights about the history and value of touch, highlighting its potency. Next, I will survey the tactile qualities of the foot washing scene. Finally, I will draw insights from two tactile scenes in the Fourth Gospel narrative which precede the foot washing. Each of these components will culminate in the conclusion that Jesus’s touch in the foot washing conveys a distinctive quality of love.

\textbf{Touch: Inferior yet Potent}

In the modern West, we commonly assume a universal sensorium consisting of five senses, valued from the greatest to least as follows: first \textit{sight}, then \textit{hearing}, followed by \textit{smell}, \textit{taste}, and finally, \textit{touch}. Aristotle is most often associated with this five-sense hierarchy, although it did not originate with him.\textsuperscript{13} Within this sensorium, the privileging of sight over the other senses is in large part due to the Enlightenment’s influence on sight.

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{10}There is a distinction between neurobiology and neuroscience, although these terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Neurobiology is the study of how the brain works biologically, studied across animal species. Neuroscience is a newer discipline, focusing on the brain and how it impacts behaviour and cognitive function. This study’s use of both terms acknowledges how both disciplines variously affirm and address how sense perception reciprocally impacts body and mind.
\item \textsuperscript{12}Cottrill, “A Reading of Ehud,” 448–9.
\item \textsuperscript{13}Louise Vinge, \textit{The Five Senses: Studies in a Literary Tradition} (Lund: LiberLaromedel, 1975). 15, explains that while this classification was recognized before Aristotle, it was his writing on the soul which more firmly established and gave it prominence. Aristotle considered sight and hearing as the more “distant” senses, experienced through the medium of air (\textit{De An}. 2.419a10; 2.420a5). Smell also operates through the air (\textit{De An}. 2.422a15) but was ranked just below sight and hearing and simultaneously classed with the “lower” senses of taste and touch. This positioned smell as a “bridge” between the pairs of senses (\textit{De An}. 5.445a7–10). Aristotle considered taste and touch as the more “tactile,” directly mediated senses. While taste is mediated by the tongue (\textit{De An}. 2.422a15), touch is even more direct, since “we perceive tangible things not by a medium, but at the same time as the medium” (\textit{De An}. 423b17–18).
\end{itemize}
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as “the” sense of science. This standardised approach to the senses, then, is based on the notion that the sensorium is biologically determined. As such, what “feels” instinctive is also deemed universal.  

While science does indicate the empirical value of touch, there is nuance to how touch operates in various cultural contexts. The presumed normativity of the penta-sensorium has been overturned in recent decades by emerging fields like Sensory Anthropology, which demonstrates the variety of ways the senses are ranked. Anthropologist Paul Stoller’s work with the Songhay people of Niger revealed how they often prioritise taste, smell, and hearing above sight. The Ongee of the Andaman Islands in the South Pacific prioritise their world by smell. The Hausa of Nigeria recognise only two senses, with one word designating sight, and one verb capturing all non-visual senses. Yael Avrahami’s work in the Hebrew Scriptures observes a septa-sensory scheme—adding speech and kinaesthesia to the “typical” five. Together these studies refute the modern assumption of a universally identical sensorium. Biblical scholars have increasingly been taking their cues from studies like these to give attention to how the lesser-valued, non-visual senses feature within the historical landscape of the biblical text.

Sensory Anthropology helps explain the long history, progression, and influence of this Aristotelian penta-sensory hierarchy, observing how social and cultural dynamics preserve its primacy. In short, sensory hierarchies are maintained by their attachment to social rank and order. Dominant groups in society are linked to more highly revered senses (e.g., sight and hearing), while subordinate groups are linked to senses that are ascribed lower value. In the modern West, these dominant groups have been ordered

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14 David Howes, ed., Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 4, notes the tendency of science and psychology to approach perception as private, internal, ahistorical, and apolitical. But we cannot ignore culture, and he notes how the senses do not just spring up “from some grotto in the head.”
16 Constance Classen, Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures (London: Routledge, 1993), 1–2, notes that when an Ongee wants to refer to “me,” he points to his nose. The Tzotzil of Mexico recognize heat as “the basic force of the cosmos.”
18 Avrahami, The Senses, 127. This is an interesting finding relative to the present study, depending on the extent to which ancient readers of the Fourth Gospel were culturally attuned to the senses observed in the Hebrew Bible. Positing a sensorium for the Fourth Gospel is beyond the purpose of this study, although it is an interesting question—what is the operative sensorium in John?
19 Howes, Empire, 10; David Howes and Constance Classen, Ways of Sensing: Understanding the Senses in Society (New York: Routledge, 2014), 3, note that within the Aristotelian penta-sensory hierarchy, smell, taste, and touch are not as highly prized for the cultural value they convey, “primarily because cognition is not usually associated with ‘lower’ senses in modern culture.”
by gender, class, and race, which means that lower ranked groups—such as women, non-Westerners, and those working in more manual labour occupations—tend to be connected to the lesser-valued senses of smell, taste, and touch.20

This dynamic materialised most recently when the global community went on lockdown in response to the pandemic. Isobel Sigley has observed how the pandemic has had disproportionate impact upon underprivileged and “Othered” populations.21 This is because abstaining from dangerous touch by staying home was easier for the more “privileged” to do, which in many geographical areas tends to be composed of “white, able-bodied, upper [class], and male” populations.22

In the ancient world, social and economic dynamics correlated similarly to the senses.23 Those of a lower status were associated with “bad” smells like perspiration and were often deemed “unpleasant” or “dangerous.” Higher status groups were associated with the more pleasing smells they could afford, like perfumes, incense, and gardens.24 The senses were also gendered. Men were more readily connected to sight and hearing as they governed the external world,25 while women were more often confined to the home, where “the feminine sensory sphere consisted of labours associated with the intimately corporeal senses of touch, taste, and smell.”26

The gendering of senses often simultaneously overlapped with social and economic status. The “ideal” elite woman was modest, expressed through a restriction on what she could see and hear as she was kept at home. However, this practice necessitated the economic means to send servants out into the world to complete tasks on her behalf.27 This meant, of course, that female servants and women of lesser economic means were out in the world in contrast with the

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20 Howes, *Empire*, 10. Those who work with their hands in manual labour occupations tend to be ranked lower in society, while those who work with their “heads” reside in the upper classes.


22 Sigley, “It Has Touched Us All,” 1.


25 For example, David Potter, “The Social Life of the Senses,” in *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity*, Vol. 1, ed. Jerry Toner (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 28, notes that the sense of sight was associated with societal power structures. Women were often excluded from certain amphitheatre-style entertainment, and when they were included, men were privileged to have the closest seats.


modest ideal.

Finally, the senses were often entangled with morality. Sensory stereotypes formed among the elite whereby manual labour became associated with and judged (negatively) by its physical sights and smells. Many took on the smells of their trades, such as the ripe stench associated with tanners or fullers. Brothels and the women who worked there presented the clearest example of the entanglement of the senses with gender, economics, and morality. Brothels were considered to have a foul stench, reflective of how they disrupted the social order. Women in particular “were thought to smell like a corrupted body themselves.” Therefore, as we examine the way the senses operate variously in cultures, Sensory Anthropology sheds light on how social disparity both reflects and fosters sensory rankings, linking the senses with these various societal dynamics.

We turn now to evaluate the sense of touch. One might equate its low rank with its trivial nature, but touch is quite potent, for three primary reasons. First, according to empirical research findings in both neuroscience and neurobiology, the sense of touch has strong potential to make a positive impact on people, including the creation of empathic connections. Though ranked as the “lowest” sense, Aristotle considered touch the most important for sustaining life given that it is the lowest common factor for sustaining all living organisms—human, animal, and plant. Touch is required for “being,” while the other senses are required for “wellbeing.” As the first medium of communication, touch is critical to a child’s flourishing; infants die without nurturing touch. Neglect indicates to a child that he or she has little or no self-worth. While people can survive without eyes or ears, no one survives without touch. Second, the potency of touch lies in its proximity. Unlike the sense of sight, which requires no physical interaction, touch operates physically up close. Skin is the most direct organ of touch; it

28 Toner, “Introduction,” 7, summarizes that this meant that “immorality stank.”
31 Stephanie Arel, Affect Theory, Shame, and Christian Formation (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2016), 141. While well-intended touch is, for the most part, a positive way to convey love, later we will nuance the important range of responses both individuals and people groups have to receiving touch. These positive and negative reactions reflect touch’s potency.
32 Aristotle, De An. 2.413b; 413b9–10.
33 Susan Stewart, “Remembering the Senses,” in Howes, Empire, 61.
34 Arel, Affect Theory, 132. Neglect of touch can have “the greatest negative impact on brain development.” Ashley Montagu, Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 3, notes that a foetus will respond to touch even before the eyes and ears are formed.
35 Arel, Affect Theory, 132.
is bi-directional and reciprocal. Third and finally, the potency of touch is correlated to its pervasive reach. Skin, as the largest organ of the human body, positions touch as “the base of the other senses,” “facilitat[ing] most sensory experience.” As such, touch is often overlooked as a perceptual vehicle since, as Sigley points out, it is often an unconscious “means to an end.” Constance Classen observes how we take touch for granted, as it becomes “a medium for the production of meaningful acts, rather than meaningful in itself.” Touch is particularly potent when considering how it mediates powerful, proximate human interactions, including those involving love, aggression, physical coercion, or sex.

The Foot Washing Scene

Unique to John’s Gospel, the foot washing marks the arrival of “the hour” of Jesus’s pending departure to the cross, where he will “love [his own who were in the world] to the end” (13:1b). As we explore the foot washing, observe the tactile interaction, as John narrates (13:2–5),

And during Supper, the devil had already put into the heart of Judas, of Simon Iscariot, to betray him. Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he came from God and was going to God, got up from supper, and laying aside his outer garments, he took a towel and tied it around himself. Then he poured water into the basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

As we explore the tactile qualities of this interaction, certain narrative details lend potency to the way the physical encounter is interpreted by later readers and interpreters, as well as by Jesus in vv. 12–17. First, rather than wash their feet when they first enter the room, as was customary, Jesus draws attention to his actions as he gets up from the table “during supper.” Second, Judas’s betrayal is mentioned alongside this love Jesus offers his disciples “to the end.” For the reader this both underscores the magnitude of Jesus’s expression of love, but it also links the foot washing to Jesus’s impending death. Many

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37 Howes and Classen, Ways of Sensing, 8; Walter Ong, Presence of the Word (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967), 74, speaks about how sight’s distance manifests limited modes of apprehending the world: “Sight reveals only surfaces.”

38 Sigley, “It Has Touched Us All,” 2.

39 Sigley, “It Has Touched Us All,” 2.


41 “To the end” is a Johannine double entendre implying loving “fully” and to the point of death, so Keener, John, 2:899; Edward W. Klink, John, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 576; Brown, John, 2:550.

42 Brown, John, 2:563.
have thus interpreted the foot washing as a symbolic prefiguring of the cleansing, or, the forgiveness of sins, that the cross is interpreted to accomplish.\(^{43}\) Jesus articulates a second, ethical meaning of the foot washing in vv. 12–17, reasoning that if he as their Teacher and Lord washes their feet, then they are to do the same for one another.\(^{44}\) The humble quality of service conveyed through the foot washing provides a model for this type of love they are to embody. The relevance of these meanings is tuned to the degree to which these would be attached to readers’ interpretation of the tactile exchange. For example, if the tactile foot washing conveys a certain quality of love, and if Jesus has invited disciples to love each other in this way, then this must prompt reflection on what kind of love they are to extend in action.

Focusing now on the foot washing itself, Jesus embodies how a servant would adorn oneself when he lays aside his outer robe, takes up a towel, and ties it around himself. Keener suggests that Jesus does this to leave his hands free to handle their feet.\(^{45}\) The text does not specify how Jesus touches their feet; it simply narrates, “he began to wash their feet.” This would involve pouring water over their feet into the basin,\(^{46}\) but was he directly handling their feet with his bare hands? We cannot be sure, although the shockwaves provoked by his taking on this servant’s role implies that he did.\(^{47}\) Either way, he would handle their feet when drying them with the towel.

Raymond Brown observes that the “key” to understanding the foot washing is in Jesus’s ensuing dialogue with Peter.\(^{48}\) Peter misunderstands what Jesus is doing and protests against the foot washing, stating (13:8), “you will never wash my feet!” His objection in part reflects his inability to think of this foot washing beyond “what is socially fitting.”\(^{49}\) Ancient Mediterranean culture governs personal interactions by social status and ranking, so there is a level of social impropriety in Jesus’s act. Jesus, their Rabbi and Lord, has assumed a menial task reserved for the lowest-ranked servants; foot washing

\(^{43}\) Keener, John, 2:902; Klink, John, 577; Brown, John, 2:566. As John narrates how Jesus lays aside his garments to wash his disciples’ feet, followed by taking them up again, this is widely observed to connect back to John 10:17–18, where Jesus as the good shepherd lays down his life so that he may take it up again. By this the foot washing retains a Christological significance, pointing ahead to Jesus’s death on the cross. For readers who thus link Jesus’s foot washing gesture to his death, it raises the question: is there a sense in which this connection might prompt the tactile qualities of the former to impact their reflections on the implications of the latter?

\(^{44}\) This example resonates with the new commandment he gives them, which is to love each other as he has loved them (13:34–35; 15:12–13).

\(^{45}\) Keener, John, 2:908.

\(^{46}\) Keener, John, 2:908, citing also Homer Il. 9.174; Apollodorus 2.7.6, among others.

\(^{47}\) So Keener, John, 908.

\(^{48}\) Brown, John, 2:565.

\(^{49}\) Carson, John, 463.
was considered “beneath” even the rank of Jewish servants in some settings.\textsuperscript{50} John Thomas’s study of the foot washing scene leads him to conclude that Jesus washing the feet of his disciples was “unrivalled in antiquity.”\textsuperscript{51} and Craig Keener adds, “social inferiors expected help from patrons, but not service from them; such a reversal of roles created discomfort.”\textsuperscript{52} Peter is presumably mortified that Jesus should assume such a humble, even humiliating posture. Jesus has reversed the roles.

Within this reversal, I suggest that the sense of touch contributes to the social impropriety of this gesture. The shock of this gesture is, in part, that Jesus would touch his disciples’ feet as he washes them.\textsuperscript{53} Since handling feet was reserved for the role of the servant, the disciples were accustomed to this cultural rule around touch. When Jesus reverses roles by washing their feet, he also disrupts these rules.

**Rule-Reversals Around Touch**

Precisely because touch is so potent, its practice is highly structured. Every people group has rules—even if implicit—about touch. These rules define what is proper in terms of who can touch whom, as well as determining appropriate settings for “tactile contact.”\textsuperscript{54} Our global society’s unspoken rules around touch came to light in 2020 with COVID–19. Almost overnight, we witnessed a drastic change—a reversal, even—in our rules around touch. Practices we once considered to convey great kindness—a handshake, a hug—were suddenly discouraged as potentially dangerous. What once might have been deemed rude—carving a wide path around neighbours while taking a walk—swiftly transformed into kindness. The pandemic has highlighted the role that touch plays in our communal life out in the world, and this “typically inconspicuous sense [is] now thrust into the spotlight.”\textsuperscript{55} The pandemic has brought to light one of global society’s generalised tactile “rules,” which suggests that well-intended touch can convey kindness and love. And then, the virus dictated new rules: proximity invites danger, while social distance is the best way to care for a neighbour. This reversal feels so jarring because our bodies are habituated to the old rules; we have not made the adjustment.

Within a society’s collective set of proprieties and customs around touch,

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  \item \textsuperscript{50} Keener, John, 2:904, notes that this includes, in various settings, servants, free women, and even Gentile over Jewish slaves.
  \item \textsuperscript{51} Thomas, Footwashing, 115.
  \item \textsuperscript{52} Keener, John, 2:909. Richard Bauckham, Testimony of the Beloved Disciple (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 193 adds, “for a superior to perform the act for an inferior would be an incomprehensible contradiction of their social relationship.”
  \item \textsuperscript{53} Keener, John, 2:908.
  \item \textsuperscript{54} Ruth Finnegan, “Tactile Communication,” in Classen, The Book of Touch, 18.
  \item \textsuperscript{55} Sigley, “It Has Touched Us All,” 2.
\end{itemize}
individuals maintain their own internal “rules” around touch as well. We each have personal comfort levels with how we both utilise our touch and receive the touch of others. Some grow up in affectionate families where the customary (and expected) greeting is to hug, or to kiss both cheeks. Other family systems share affection with greater reserve. Those who have experienced trauma involving touch—such as those surviving sexual abuse, or medical procedures requiring extensive, invasive contact—may be strongly resistant to the idea that receiving the touch of others is kind or loving. Our tactile sensitivities exist across a range: from those who process tactile contact as an invasion or irritation, to those who find touch as a comfort, to those who may even hunger for it (literally dubbed “skin hunger” by some\textsuperscript{56}).

This study seeks to maintain sensitivity to the wide range of receptivity to touch on both individual and corporate levels. Not everyone will resonate in the same way with the premise that the touch of the foot washing conveys love. At the same time, empirical research findings, as noted, suggest the importance of touch for maintaining life. Considering that touch is both variously received and yet at differing degrees empirically necessary, it must be said that for some it may be a greater kindness to abstain from touch, which ultimately affirms its overall potency.

Since a society’s rules around touch impact how one extends and receives tactile contact, when the rules suddenly shift, this disrupts and alters one’s relation to that physical sense. The pandemic’s reversal of tactile rules demonstrates how a well-intended touch is suddenly not necessarily good: being hugged by someone who might expose you to a virus is no longer kind and is possibly dangerous. In the current-day disruption of tactile practices of sharing love and affection, touch has gone missing, but the body remembers\textsuperscript{57}. For bodies habituated to receive touch as kindness, a disruption of this rhythm requires adaptation. Through this interruption we are confronted with how we value touch.

**Reversal at the Foot Washing**

Our own experiences with cultural rules around touch during a pandemic can help this foot washing scene to “get under our skin,” uncovering insight into the ancient reader’s understanding of the narrative effects of Jesus’s touch. Through the foot washing, Jesus


\textsuperscript{57} For an example of bodies not adapted to this rule reversal, one might recall social media documentation featuring creative and safe ways to touch during lockdown—such as “hug gloves” made of clear plastic tarp sleeves (Tara Parker-Pope, “How to Hug During a Pandemic,” *The New York Times*, June 4 2020, url: tinyurl.com/359fpdd2.)
instigates his own rule-reversal on touch. First-century Jewish communities implemented standards regarding proper touch as laid out in written and oral laws. Jesus assumes a menial task reserved for the lowest-ranked servant; it was not suitable for the teacher to wash his disciples’ feet. Touch is wrapped up into this humble gesture, and its low rank combined with Jesus as its initiator may play a role in Peter’s resistance. Given these ancient cultural standards regarding foot washing and what was considered “proper,” Peter’s protest may reflect on some tacit, unconscious level his conviction that Jesus is breaking the rules of proper modes of touch. Through this disruption, then, Peter represents someone with habituated rules around touch being invited to consider new “rules.” As the master takes on the servant’s role, Jesus’s touch breaks both the personal space and social rank between them. Jesus’s touch may be the most direct “invasion” as he crosses the boundaries to grasp his disciples’ feet.

The rule-reversals of both the foot washing and the pandemic instigate a similar level of surprise, the latter helping us understand the former. Just as we were surprised by how COVID–19 deemed touch dangerous and largely expelled it from our lives, Jesus surprises the disciples by how he redefines humble touch, giving foot washing new significance. As the master washes the servants’ feet, his humble touch engages them up close and comingles with their filth in order to remove it. Moreover, recall that this gesture is simultaneously a ground-breaking call and commission of the disciples to love one another in the same way he has loved them (13:12–17, 34–35). So not only is this tactile interaction unprecedented because it is such a surprising reversal, but Jesus transforms this humble gesture of impropriety into an exemplary model for how to love another.

**Earlier Fourth Gospel Tactile Reversals**

The foot washing is not the first time Jesus reverses the tactile “rules” and gets the disciples’ attention. In two earlier Fourth Gospel scenes, John presents Jesus as engaging others up close with touch. In both instances Jesus’s tactile interaction disrupts cultural rules around touch, for the bystanders and for those he touches. The following briefly explores these scenes as they narratively lead to the foot washing. A cumulative view of all three together will contribute to our understanding of how touch conveys love.

In the first scene (John 9), Jesus encounters the man born blind just after declaring himself to be “the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5). This scene is more commonly the focus of the two-level reading, but here we focus in on its sensory qualities. Jesus demonstrates

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59 The two-level reading understands the narrative as being about both the life of Jesus and the Johannine community. The genesis of this approach is linked to the work of J. Louis Martyn, *History and*
how he is the light by literally creating light out of darkness: he generates sight in the blind man’s eyes. Louise Lawrence has done important work in the gospels calling attention to the ways blindness often functions as a metaphor for the darkness of sin and misunderstanding, with blind characters often cast as props to contrast the development of sighted characters.60 Her work is sensitive toward calling out the negative implications and stigmas that are consequently attached to blindness. Certainly, we see here how the man’s blindness is transferred to a judgment upon the Jewish leaders’ spiritual blindness (9:39–41).61 And yet, as Lawrence highlights, in the end the formerly blind man “becomes the primary voice of revelation in the sequence...and it is he that unmasks [the Jewish leaders’] limited field of vision.”62 Important for our study here, Lawrence highlights how blindness can bring out alternative sensory engagements, like touch.63 This will both provide insight into the sensory world of someone like the formerly blind man, and it can reveal sensory deficiencies in our own sight-dominated tendencies.64

Focusing now on the mode of this Johannine sign, the text reads that Jesus applies—he literally spreads, anoints, or smears—the mud on the man’s eyes, the man washes his eyes in the water, and he sees. Curiously, mention of Jesus’s one-time touch of the man’s eyes is repeated every time the formerly blind man tells the story, which amounts to ten varying references to the interaction. While the retelling does not always explicitly state that Jesus touched his eyes (it also recalls that Jesus merely “opened” his eyes),65 the repeated narration of this exchange potentially brings this tactile exchange to the forefront for ancient readers.66


60 See especially her chapter entitled “Blind Spots and Metaphors,” in Sense and Stigma.

61 Lawrence, Sense and Stigma, 35. She brings out important insights offered by blind interpreters of the text who experience a sense of marginalisation when reading sight-centric texts.

62 Lawrence, Sense and Stigma, 49.

63 For example, Lawrence, Sense and Stigma, 48, highlights Georgina Kleege, who engages in “transgressive reappropriation” as a way of creating awareness within the dominant culture concerning its own ableist tendencies.

64 Lawrence, Sense and Stigma, 52.

65 Laid out like a courtroom scene, the man is asked to recount Jesus’s healing actions multiple times, each time referring to his eyes, his former blindness, Jesus’s healing touch, and his resulting sight. All such references to touch are to the one event. Words referencing this interaction include: he made clay (epoiesen pêlon, 9:6, 11, 14), he spread, smeared, or anointed his eyes with it (epechrisen, 9:6, 11), he applied clay (pêlon epetheken, 9:15), or it is simply summarised with the more collective term, he “opened” his eyes (ênoixen, 9:10, 14, 17, 21, 26, 30, 32). This latter term is probably no more than an implied reference to touch, since it subsumes the entire tactile interaction into that one verb: Jesus applied mud, the man washed, his eyes could see.

66 The two-level reading potentially invests even greater tactile value for those ancient readers who identify with the blind man in their experience of synagogue opposition: Jesus is represented as touching their eyes too.
The disruptive nature of this interaction is shown in the bystanders who take offense at Jesus’s act, including the religious leaders who oppose his “work” on the Sabbath. While the tactile component of the interchange is not overtly countered—similar to the foot washing—I contend that the tacit dynamics of touch within this exchange both contribute to the interruption and lend a quality of love from Jesus to the blind man. Moreover, the ambiguous nature of Jesus’s use of spit and dirt to touch the man’s eyes may add controversy into this interaction. “Spittle” in some Jewish traditions could have positive curative effects in treating eye disease. However, it could also carry negative implications (Num 12:14), which might breed a layer of shame or impurity into this tactile exchange. Those aware of these dynamics potentially experience a visceral, subliminal layer of affective resistance at the mention of this interaction.

In contrast with the observers’ resistance, the man is poised to be receptive to Jesus’s touch. Here is someone whose day-to-day life was profoundly shaped by his lack of sight within a sighted community, impacting him physically, economically, socially, even spiritually. Touch was likely a vital mode of knowledge for this man, more highly ranked in his own native, personal sensorium. While onlookers in a world with highly regulated tactile conventions take offense, for the blind man Jesus’s touch might be at once welcomed and a shock. On the one hand Jesus is “speaking his language,” since the man is more attuned to experiencing his world through touch. On the other hand, this man has been relegated in his context to sit and beg (9:8). So even while touch might feel more comforting and familiar to him, he might not expect Jesus to engage him in this way, since people rarely did.

This disruptive, tactile interaction has the power to convey love to the man in two ways. First, while he did not rely on the sense of sight for his physical survival in the world, sight’s high societal rank suggests that gaining sight could provide a different sort of sustenance, allowing him to participate more fully in community life, in all the ways he had been excluded. Second, Jesus’s touch breaks the “rules” of social engagement by appealing to him using a physical sense relegated to a lower rank. In this way Jesus’s touch invests humility, intimacy, and dignity into the exchange. Jesus conveys humility by touching his eyes in the first place. Jesus’s touch transmits a unique intimacy not only by addressing the man in this familiar way, but simply by his close physical proximity. Finally, this is a tactile interaction. Jesus touches his eyes and invites him to respond: the man must wash the mud away to see. By this Jesus confers dignity on the man through touch.

67 Keener, John, 1:779–81, surveys this background and controversy in Jesus’s gesture.
in essence saying to this societal outcast, overlooked and undervalued, “you are here to me.”

In the second scene, not long before the foot washing, Mary anoints Jesus’s feet with expensive perfume (12:3). What is most often noticed about this scene is how the copious amount of nard emits a strong fragrance. What is less often explored is the presence of touch, as “Mary... anoints Jesus’s feet and wipes his feet with her hair” (12:3; cf. 11:2). Anointing with perfume might seem less tactile if this involves merely pouring perfume on his feet. But when she goes to wipe his feet with her hair, this must entail some sort of touch of his feet, even if this touch is mediated through her hair. This resembles Jesus handling his disciples’ feet, even if through a towel, to dry them off. This act potentially carries manifold significance: in celebrating Jesus’s messianic identity Mary both prepares him for his burial (12:7), and she embodies a disciple’s worshipful devotion and response.

Once again, the disruptive nature of this interaction is evidenced by the objection of onlookers; in this scene it is Judas who protests the wasteful quality of such a gesture (12:5). The tactile element of the interaction is not explicitly emphasised, but the subliminal dynamics of touch may contribute both to the surprise and to the quality of love conveyed. Like the ambiguity of Jesus using spit to cure the blind man, Mary’s act carries potential surprise for the ancient reader because of its uncertain level of propriety. When a woman lets down her hair, is she acting sexually suggestive, is she expressing grief, or is she demonstrating religious devotion? This diversity of options introduces ambiguity into what is about to happen.

The anointing that follows disrupts the tactile “rules” in interesting ways that correlate with the other two scenes. In contrast with Jesus’s touch of the blind man’s eyes, Mary is the initiator of tactile contact with Jesus, which is astonishing because of how uncommon it is across many cultures for inferiors in a social hierarchy to engage in tactile interaction with anyone “above” them in rank. And Mary is socially inferior in two ways. First, in relation to Jesus she is in the position of student, or disciple. Second is her place in society as a female. Even if she occupied a higher class in society, as a woman she generally carried lesser social status than a man. In this way her relation to touch is like....

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68 Arel, Affect Theory, 142.
69 She anointed (éleipsen) and wiped (exemaxen) his feet.
70 It was customary for Palestinian Jewish women to keep their hair bound and heads covered, but there are several reasons why women in this cultural context might let down their hair, with different levels of honour imbued in each. See Charles Cosgrove, “A Woman’s Unbound Hair in the Greco-Roman World, with Special Reference to the Story of the ‘Sinful Woman’ in Luke 7:36–50,” JBL 124 (2005): 675–92, doi:10.2307/30041064.
71 Moltmann-Wendel, I Am My Body, 90.
that of the blind man in how touch is often assigned to or associated with lower classes of society. In this regard it might be unsurprising for a female—compared to the males at the supper—to be the one to anoint Jesus’s feet, even if it is simultaneously a startling way to engage their revered teacher.

Like the foot washing, Mary’s anointing of Jesus’s feet is a remarkably humble gesture. In this way Mary is the first to disrupt the rules around the touch of feet since this is the first instance of a tactile foot-anointing in the narrative. Among his onlookers, she is the first to posture herself before Jesus’s feet as a humble, devoted servant (cf. John 11:32). The surprising humility of this scene sets the narrative stage for the foot washing. Disciples at the Last Supper, along with ancient readers, would recall Mary’s recent act. In fact, as Jesus begins washing his disciples’ feet, Mary’s anointing might resonate as slightly more proper, since she is the student, or disciple, anointing Jesus. With that, it seems possible that the memory of her gesture would validate the sense of protest Peter embodies when Jesus prepares to touch his feet. All of this paves the way for Jesus to reverse the rules by stating that servants are not greater than their master (13:16) and since he, the Teacher, has washed their feet, they are now to do the same for one another (13:14). Ancient readers observing these twin anointing-washing scenes, juxtaposed a chapter apart, must grapple with their shared tactile quality and how the rules around touch are disturbed and even reversed.

Mary’s anointing is a disruptive, tactile interaction that conveys a particular quality of love. Due to its proximal nature, mutual touch represents a wordless conversation, an exchange. Skin communicates in two directions. Mary’s touch applies a fragrance and has the power to express her internal heart in an outward manner. Jesus then receives her touch into his own heart, which is the outward received internally.\(^7\) Similar to Jesus’s tactile interaction with the blind man, his response confers dignity upon Mary (impacting her internally), as his acceptance of her touch serves to “raise [her] up from the shadows.”\(^8\) Mary’s unconventional anointing, therefore, is a unique reciprocity of humility and love.\(^9\)

\(^7\) Lee, “Gospel,” 124, states that her touch “[articulates] the reciprocity of love in this Gospel.”
\(^8\) Moltmann-Wendel, I Am My Body, 90. “A small existence confirmed and transformed by a great existence.”
\(^9\) J. F. Coakley, “The Anointing at Bethany and the Priority of John,” \textit{JBL} 107 (1988): 252, doi:10.2307/3267698, quotes Theodore of Mopsuestia, Syriac version ed. J.-M Vosté, CSCO 115 (Louvain: CSCO, 1940), 233, who speaks to this intimacy and reciprocity by smell and touch. It suggests a transformative presence: “For it was as if the woman planned this so as to attach the fragrance of our Lord’s flesh to her body. For she took care that she should always be with him: she did this in her love so that if she should come to be separated from him, by this she could suppose he was with her still.”
The Foot Washing as Inherently Compassionate

Taking these two tactile scenes into consideration (John 9, 12), we return to the foot washing in John 13. Jesus’s touch conveys a certain quality of love for his disciples that could not be conveyed from a distance. Before this, they witnessed his tactile exchanges with others—including Jesus’s touch of the blind man’s eyes and Mary’s touch of Jesus’s feet. Through these interactions, Jesus communicated an up-close, proximate quality of compassion that could not be expressed in any other manner. As Jesus engaged the blind man by “speaking his language,” and as he allowed Mary’s touch to initiate an exchange of reciprocated love, Jesus’s touch in the foot washing reflects his willingness to engage with his beloved friends up close. The foot washing displays what this humble love looks like, and it conveys to the disciples what this love feels like.

Jesus’s touch of their feet is an unprecedented reversal of “proper” touch. It pioneers a new path, conveying a potent quality of love that the disciples had not yet experienced themselves. Jesus’s touch breaks the “rules” of both social rank and personal space. Its startling quality not only calls attention to the gesture, but its boundary-breaking adds to the compassion conveyed. Jesus says, in essence, that his love is intense enough to cross this tactile boundary, and then the actual crossing of the border conveys love.

Jesus expresses love to his disciples, and then he exhorts them to love each other likewise. This might seem to beg the question: is Jesus mandating the practice of foot washing as the way to demonstrate love? While foot washing should not be ruled out as an exemplary way to convey love in their context, its tactile quality makes it possible to understand this as an expression of love meant to cross boundaries. Furthermore, the exhortation to love one another invites reflection on how this kind of love might be enacted by any who identify with Jesus’s disciples. Should touch be involved? Perhaps. As demonstrated so far, touch can convey a unique, proximal empathic connection with others that distant senses cannot accomplish.

A Touch of Love Today

In the wake of COVID–19’s sudden deprivation of physical proximity and presence with one another, our creaturely design for connection has led us to compensate. Our bodies have still not acclimated to these new “rules” around touch. While it was decreed that “distance” now conveys kindness, we still crave connection and proximity. We have compensated by flocking to video conferencing technologies and virtual “live” venues to fill the physical distance with shared virtual presence in the realm of time. However, nothing quite replaces the ability of touch to convey a proximate quality of presence and compassion through personal, bi-directional, tactile expression. As we had to re-learn
different, more physically distant expressions of kindness, what value will touch retain in the unknown landscape of a future post-COVID–19 world? Sigley affirms an empirical need for touch when she states, “without tactile expression, empathy falters, making it harder to recognise the mutuality of the trying circumstances. This compels us to impress our presence and open empathetic channels in new, predominantly digital (hence disembodied) ways.”

Our tech-savvy society has crucially shifted to conform to the new rules with remarkable speed, revising how humans can connect from afar. However, as the pandemic wanes on—even with lockdowns no longer in effect—there remains a “skin hunger” and sense of tactile deprivation contributing to loneliness, isolation, and faltering mental health. Bodies have not caught up to the new rules, and they may not be designed to do so.

Our current limits around touch make its expression that much more potent. Its sudden absence from our lives has reminded us of its capacity to convey kindness and love. Essential workers, and especially health-care professionals on the front lines of combating the virus, embody this potency. Since touch has become more dangerous, those treating the sick engage in proximity and touch with greater risk. Their touch is more valuable, more sacrificial, and more heroic for the greater good of all. Like the foot washing, theirs is a touch of love, breaking boundaries in a way that communicates loving presence.

Before Jesus washes his disciples’ feet, foot washing is regulated by being relegated only to the humblest of servants. As he crosses this boundary, Jesus the teacher infuses this humble gesture with unparalleled value, exhorting his friends to emulate this same quality of embodied love. Their surprise reflects how their bodies were not accustomed to foot washing as a representative way to express love. Jesus’s foot washing proposes to re-write the rules on touch. His gesture in essence maps touch onto his definition of what love of a neighbour looks like. It is not that they are to love others only by foot washing and touch, but there is a quality of love that Jesus passes along through the foot washing, in which touch plays a role.

Conclusion

Touch is unique among the senses: its physical proximity and reciprocal empathy is unlike anything provided by visible pictures or audible words. Therefore, this unprecedented act of washing feet presents a unique embodied quality of love. The rule-reversal on touch brings out the potency with which this love is conveyed. In this way, the tactile quality of

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75 Sigley, “It Has Touched Us All,” 2.
his gesture supports how Jesus illustrates “the nature of [the] intense love” that Van der Watt proposed. Even though love can be expressed in a multitude of ways, the up-close quality and presence of touch is irreplaceable. By considering how touch has been omitted from our practices throughout most of 2020 and into the pandemic years following, it seems possible that our own understanding of the importance of touch to convey love will resonate with the kind of love Jesus communicates to his friends by his touch of their feet. As modern readers interacting with the foot washing seek to foster their own love of neighbour, it is worth reflecting on what “a touch of love” means in these embodied interactions.

**Bibliography**


