

**M**y heart has been drawn to the broken, the disenfranchised, the ignored, the abandoned, those whom others fear, for at least 20 years, long before I knew Christ. I know now that this came out of my personal story as I related to these human beings out of my own core of suffering. I befriended a homeless man whom I encountered most every day as I walked across the bridge into the city to work my summer jobs at the age of 21. Every day he was there, I visited with him. I took him things he might be able to use. I brought him a larger "care package" my last day of work that summer, and I cried as I walked away, saying goodbye for the last time. I didn't understand my heart at the time. I didn't cry for things in my own life. But I cried for him. I did not know that I was crying for my own heart and life as well, a life that had endured abuse, neglect, and being used for so many years.

Today, this heart is so much more alive and connected as I have come to know Christ and His love for the broken, including me, and as I have pursued and allowed His healing in my life. Today, I live in central Phoenix and encounter the broken and the homeless on a regular basis. If at all possible, I try to find out a person's name and extend my hand so that he/she can experience a moment of healthy human touch and relationship, praying that this brings even a tiny sense of worth as a human being, heals a tiny scar on his/her heart from the likely numerous inhuman treatments over a lifetime, and more than anything, that he/she would believe my statement that "I will be praying for you" and experience His touch and love above all else.

I live in a predominantly Mexican neighborhood and I love it because people are out. I know my neighbors faces and they know mine, and at times we even develop friendly relationships and know each others' names. I have a group of young men I have been able to connect with- likely alcoholics and perhaps drug addicts. As I was offered the first sip of one young man's cold liter of Miller in a glass bottle, I was playfully harassed because apparently he has never offered anyone his first cold sip. I was able to playfully but truthfully explain that I have been sober since 1996 because of Jesus, and as they all stared aghast at this new revelation, I also got to list all that Jesus has set me free from, and that though it has been a long and painful journey, I have hope and life and freedom that I am not willing to trade for a cold sip of Miller. I shared with them that there are too many horrible memories attached to that smell and taste that truly there is no desire... though I thanked him again for his generous offer. I thanked them for their care for me and that I knew that they had my back, which they loudly and boastfully reinforced. In the last weeks as I walk by whichever yard they are hanging out and drinking in and greetings are exchanged, they have called out to me to say a prayer for them. I continue to tell them, whether invited or not, that I am praying for them. I do not know their histories, but I know more and more of their recent stories and I know that there is so much for each of

them to heal from. I pray that through our encounters they are able to experience Jesus and His love, and that one day they will turn to Him for their own freedom and healing.

One of my most profound experiences was with Daniel at a Q-T. I try to pray and obey the Spirit's prompting as to how He would have me engage with the homeless on any given day. On this particular day, I asked this rather dirty and unkempt man to hold on a second as I placed my things in my car and grabbed some money to give to him. As I returned I extended my hand to meet him, ask for his name, and let him know I would be praying for him. As I did this, he held my hand just a little longer than is typical in these interactions. My gut was not concerned (perhaps because it was late morning and many were around, but more likely because my spirit sensed his genuine need), and I began to engage Daniel in conversation. I learned some about his history, including that he had been homeless for some time but that in the next day or two he was to be placed in a subsidized unit for the seriously mentally ill (SMI). I celebrated with him and told him how thrilled I was for him! We talked a bit about Jesus and how we can trust Him in everything. I needed to go due to scheduled appointments, and it seemed Daniel knew this as well. We both extended our hands as I stated that I was sorry, but I needed to run. Daniel held onto my hand, and I covered his hand with my other hand as I looked into his eyes and saw such pain and brokenness. Tears welled in my eyes as he almost whispered "I don't want to let go". I responded "I know, Daniel, I know. I will be praying for you", held onto his hand a moment longer, and then had to turn to go.

I got in my car with tears spilling over and waved to Daniel as I backed away, and this time I understood where they flowed from unlike almost 20 years ago. I knew deep within my soul what Daniel meant. This was not a man who had some perverse reason for not wanting to let go of my hand. This was a man who longed for the healthy, human touch for which we are designed by our Creator God...by our Abba Father. As I pursued my own journey of healing from abuse, neglect, and being used over and over, I did not allow any human touch when I felt at all vulnerable, and any touch that I did allow at other times, I was not connected to. I had been devoid of healthy, human touch to which I could connect for over 30 years. When I finally began to allow this touch in, by my Abba's grace and miraculous healing, my own soul and heart screamed out "please don't let go! I don't want to let go! Please, please don't let go!", even though I cognitively knew that the person needed to let go, not because of me, but simply because of life- the exact reason I needed to let go of Daniel's hand as he so painfully whispered "I don't want to let go". I know, Daniel, I know. But I pray that this small touch that you received from my hands and heart and ultimately from your Abba Daddy, your Savior God, will lead you to Him, help you to experience His love and care for you, and heal one of the many scars on your heart... just as each healthy, safe, loving, and nurturing touch did for me.

*~Wounded but Healing Vessel of Christ*