

A person's touch

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What do we think of when we think of *touch*? Of hugging a loved one, of caressing a child's cheek, or of intimacy with a partner? Or do some of us know touch only as something horrid—an act of aggression or invasiveness?

The Bible includes touch in all of its innuendos—compassion, love, friendship, violence, and fear. There is the bleeding woman who risks touching Jesus' hem with her hand, a forbidden intrusive act that he accepts as an expression of faith. There's Jesus himself, who touches strangers daily with an empowered authority, tenderness, and lack of fear—[he] [“put forth his hand, and touched him”](#) (a leper), and [“he touched her hand”](#) (Peter's mother-in-law) and [“touched their eyes”](#) (two blind men).

Judas gives us the contrasting experience, as seen in [Caravaggio's \*The Taking of Christ\*](#). As Judas hugs Jesus, Roman soldiers crowd around in a chaotic, claustrophobic scene. This is perhaps the worst example of touch: an embrace that betrays the meaning of embrace.

So what happens when strangers touch? Photographer Richard Renaldi was fascinated by the question. Beginning in 2007, he spent time talking with strangers on the street and persuading some of them to let him photograph them. He'd put two or more strangers together and have them hold hands or put their arms around each other. He sometimes asked one stranger to kiss the other stranger on the cheek.

The result is an unsettling juxtaposition for both the models and the viewers. Some people look rigid with contained emotion. Some look wary, some angry, some vulnerable. The photographs also tug at us viewers, revealing our own attitudes and emotions toward strangers. I found myself noting the pairings of strangers that looked “natural” and those that looked forced. I realized that the photos brought out my own prejudices, yearnings, and fears.

Sometimes a photo evokes anxiety: see this photo of [a policeman with his arm around the shoulders of a young girl](#).

The photographs have just been published in [\*Richard Renaldi: Touching Strangers\*](#), but some can be found online [here](#) and [here](#).