

April 19, 2019
Good Friday
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 52:13-53:12
Psalm 22
Hebrews 4:14-16, 5:7-9
John 8:1-19:42

Like all human characteristics, hands come in infinite variety: wide and narrow; dark and light; smooth and callused. There are baby hands, teenager hands, adult hands, elder hands. Some hands are manicured with painted nails; some hands are knobby with arthritis. No one's two hands are exactly the same as another person's two hands. No one's left and right hands are perfectly mirrored.

Human beings are said to have five basic senses with which to perceive the surrounding world: sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. Fingers contain some of the body's densest concentrations of nerve endings. Therefore hands are among the body's most effective bearers of the sense of touch. The lightest brush of feather to finger sets off a chain reaction of nerve activity that carries the sensation directly and near-instantaneously to the brain.

Like the sensory organs used for sight, hearing, taste, and smell, our hands communicate information to us from the outside world. *Unlike* those organs, our hands also have the capacity to *affect* the outside world. This is both a gift and a responsibility. The light resting of one's hand upon another's shoulder has the power to still a child or comfort a friend or beckon a lover. On the other hand, the raising of one's hand in anger can instill fear even in a pet dog—which demonstrates the potential for harm when the object of that anger is another person.

We sometimes use a hand to touch another person's hand. This is a powerful means of connection. When a newborn baby grips your thumb, it can feel as if all that is possible in the world is present in their being. When a very old person grasps your fingers, it can feel as if the entire history of the world is present in their being.

The brief clasping of hands that is a handshake has its own set of ritual rules. The brevity of a typical handshake punctuates the fact that in our social context handholding is limited to romance and children. In other cultures, even grown heterosexual men hold hands. In our culture, in which too many male hands are raised in anger, this would be a welcome sight.

Hands have 27 bones, and a person's two hands contain 26% of the bones in his or her body. Each hand also has about 40 muscles and 40 tendons. All this makes them extraordinarily mobile and suitable for an endless variety of tasks. We use our hands to write, to eat, to carry.

Jesus used his hands for these things, too. When rescuing a woman accused of adultery from the crowd that would stone her, Jesus wrote in the dust on the ground. At the last supper, to identify the one who would betray him, Jesus handed bread to Judas. On the way to Golgotha, Jesus held the cross to his shoulder.

Before that, Jesus used his hands to heal. In the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus cured a leper, he “stretched out his hand and touched him.”¹ In the Gospel of John, when Jesus cured a blind man, he “. . . spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes.”²

I don’t know the cultural rules on touching in Jesus’ time, but I imagine that he often touched others, and that he often accepted the touch of others. According to the Gospel of John, “Mary took a pound of costly perfume,” “anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair.”³ This Mary is Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus, the man Jesus raised from the dead.

Hers would have been very different from the touch that Jesus received in the last hours of his life. We can imagine that the police who arrested Jesus grabbed him and pushed him. We are told that a Roman soldier picked up a whip and flogged him. Human hands would have fashioned the leather whip that went on to perform a perverse form of touch.

When the police arrested Jesus, they bound his hands. It would be difficult to use bound hands for healing. Maybe that was the point. After all, in the end, Jesus’ hands were a particular target of violence. Using language of the senses, one poet describes it this way:

How did he do it?
Open those good hands,
spread his five fingers wide
to receive blunt nails?
Hear the crack of bone,
delicate wingwork of phalanx and carpal?
Hang the weight of his whole self
from those soft clay doves
and trust them to hold?
To hold?

They flutter light.
Brush against the good wood.
His mother’s eye catches,
watches as she used to watch
beside her dreaming child
those white birds of paradise
gently reach
for some / thing lost,
some / thing left behind,
a kingdom he saw about to come.⁴

The incarnation that began on Christmas Eve ends now on Good Friday. Jesus’ beautiful human hands are nailed to the cross. A soldier’s beautiful human hands hammered in the nails.

God gives us, too, a life of human embodiment. This is both a gift and a responsibility. Each of us must decide what to do with it. All that we do is in relation to others who are also embodied. Individually and collectively, we touch and we are touched. We are seldom perfect. We use our hands to extend help and harm, to bring comfort and oppression, to convey love and hate.

The cross is God's ultimate repudiation of violence in all its myriad forms. Through the cross, God says to neither wield violence, nor accept it. After all, a person cannot reach for the Kingdom with a hand that is holding a hammer; a person cannot reach for the Kingdom with a hand that is being held up for protection.

In the wonderful and terrible complexity of our human embodiment, we use our hands both to reach for the Kingdom and to pound the nails. And so it is that, on this night, we sit vigil with Mary the mother of Jesus, *and* we sit vigil with the Roman soldiers. On this night, we have no answers, but only questions. As Jesus hangs on the cross, how do we forgive others? As Jesus hangs on the cross, how do we forgive ourselves?

Notes

¹ Matthew 8:3, NRSV.

² John 9:6a-7, NRSV.

³ John 12:3, NRSV.

⁴ Angela O'Donnell, "The Vigil," *Christian Century*, 7 April 2009, 22.