

Isaiah 40:25-31 ~ Mark 1:29-39

Take My Hand

5th Sunday of Epiphany ~ Holy Communion ~ Scout Sunday ~ February 4, 2024

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Introduction to Scripture Lesson

Out of the frying pan and into the fire. We pick up our gospel story right where we left off last Sunday: Jesus has just fried the unclean spirit out of the man in the synagogue, only to discover another dire situation awaiting him at Simon's house. Jesus work on Day 1, is *not* done. Another person is seriously ill and in need of healing. But this time it is a woman rather than man, it is in a house rather than a synagogue, and it is a physical illness rather than a mental one. Simon's mother-in-law has a life-threatening fiery fever. What will weary Jesus do?

Communion Meditation

Raise your hand if you attended the Luther College Nordic Choir concert here on Monday night... You all with your hands raised, got to see it firsthand. 66 students in the choir holding each other's hands (in a chain) throughout every song they performed. Whether they were standing in four rows on risers, or in a large circle around the perimeter of the sanctuary. You can imagine: It is very striking visually. If the rest of you are curious, check out any of their performances on YouTube.... Not now. Later.

The reason for holding hands is not so much about the look, but how it connects the individual singers in the choir to one another. They can feel the vibrations and pulse of the music, almost like energy conducted through a wire, creating a harmony of sound that I can only describe as heavenly. Apparently while they are singing the intensity of their grip varies as they experience the music together. I learned this from Josh Olson ("Mr. Olson" to those of you who are students at Marshfield High School) who was a student of Dr. Andrew Last, the Director of the Nordic Choir, when he was at Luther College.

You, young people of FPC, who have performed in any of our Christmas plays over the last few years know what it means "to pass the electricity" when we are in a circle after play practice for our closing prayer. One by one we squeeze each other's hand around the circle to symbolize the electric power and light of Christ's love working in and through us, person to person, hand to hand. This practice helps us feel and visualize the uncanny power of Christ's love to restore, repair, and reset our spirits to be conduits of God's love and grace. It's a prayer without words, a prayer that is all action. From hand to hand. Heart to heart.

Did you notice how Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law without a single word? We are told that he took her by the hand and lifted her up. With that one gesture, he brought her back from what might have been the brink of death (fevers often resulted in death back then) to life. She was revived and renewed. The Greek word translated "lifted her up" is the same word as when Jesus was raised up from the dead. Yes, it can also mean resurrection. But Simon's mother-in-law was not the only one who was renewed and revived in this story, by the hand of Jesus.

Picture the scene of those gathered around her. You can be sure that everyone else in the room was also hurting. Scared whether she might die or not. Frustrated by their failed attempts at making her better. When one person in a family network is hurting or in pain, so is everyone who loves that one. The hurt extends into the hearts of all who care. And so does the healing. When Jesus takes Simon Peter's mother-in-law by the hand and raises her up, healing her of her fever, his healing touch extended to everyone there. Indeed: The healing power of Jesus reaches far and deep.

This story of Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law is told not only in Mark, but also in Matthew and Luke. Although each telling is slightly different, they all share one important word. It is the verb that describes what she did as soon as her fever lifted: she began to serve them. The Greek word in all three gospels is the verb *diakoneo* (to serve) διακόνει. If you are thinking that sounds like our word, "Deacon." You are right! You could say she was the first ever Deacon. She was certainly the first *human* one in Mark's gospel. But there was one before her who served Jesus. At the end of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan, Mark tells us that angels "waited on him" Jesus in 1:13. Yes, same word, *diakoneo*.

To tell you the truth, when I first heard this story, it used to kind of bother me that this poor lady gets up from her deadly fever so she can feed the men some sandwiches. It took me until seminary to learn that this is not the point of this story at all. And now you don't have to wait a minute longer to hear the fuller, richer meaning of this detail. This word, *diakoneo*. We don't know the name of this first deacon, as I am calling her. We can surmise that she was living with Simon because her husband had died. Nor is her daughter, Simon's wife, ever mentioned. None of those details were important to the writer of Mark, or Matthew, or Luke.

What did matter, the lesson for us today is this: Jesus heals her so she can once again be the hands and feet of Christ. Jesus says in Mark 10:43-45, I came to serve, (*diakoneo*) not to be served. To serve is to do Christ's work. To choose to serve is a sign of health, of resurrection. Like Simon's mother-in-law, We are healed so that we are free to serve in Christ's name. Service to others is also a powerful antidote to loneliness. Recent medical studies have revealed this ancient truth.

Service is also at the heart of Scouting. How appropriate that this would be our Revised Common Lectionary gospel text for Scout Sunday. Their slogan is "Do a good turn daily." Which means specifically to help others each day without expecting anything in return. Scout founder, Lord Baden-Powell has also said, "The good turn will educate the boy out of selfishness." True for us all of any gender and any age. One more I like from Baden-Powell: "A boy is not a sitting down animal."

Perhaps that is why Jesus knelt down and washed his disciples' feet to teach them what he meant by the command to "Love one another as I have loved you." Jesus used his hands again, this time not to heal, and revive and lift up, but to demonstrate with water and soap, with bended knee, and outer garment of protection gone, what he meant. What he came

to do. Not to get famous. It's not even ultimately about me. really *for* me. Or *about* me. It's about realizing God's dream, God's call to save the world.

Did you notice how the disciples were so excited about the buzz Jesus was causing. This hits on Instagram, the viral TikTok videos of Jesus' exorcism in the synagogue, and now healing the fever, were thrilling. Let's stay here and you do you! But Jesus stays on mission. Jesus knows the work he came to do was to proclaim God's glory, not his. Jesus subordinates even his power for healing and exorcism to the greater need for proclamation of the kingdom of God. God's dream of healing the world. One good turn at a time. Good turns – not because of what you will get out of it.

As a nation this week, we mourn the death of 3 soldiers killed in Jordan: Sergeant Moffett, Sergeant Sanders, and Staff Sergeant Rivers: service people who gave their very lives in the line of duty, serving their country. Yesterday, Feb. 3, was the 81st anniversary of another story of self-sacrifice. One that you may have heard, but it certainly bears retelling. And remembering. It is a true story of four men who understood what "waiting upon the Lord" that is *servicing* the Lord means. Here it is:

Hans J. Danielsen, the ship's captain, was concerned and cautious. Danielsen knew he was in dangerous waters: German U-boats were constantly prowling these vital sea lanes, and several ships had already been blasted and sunk. The Dorchester was now only 150 miles from its destination, but the captain ordered the men to sleep in their clothing and keep life jackets on. Many soldiers sleeping deep in the ship's hold disregarded the order because of the engine's heat. Others ignored it because the life jackets were uncomfortable.

On Feb. 3, 1943, at 12:55 a.m., a German submarine U-223 spotted the Dorchester and hit it with a decisive—and deadly—striking the starboard side, amid ship, far below the water line. Captain Danielsen, alerted that the Dorchester was taking water rapidly and sinking, gave the order to abandon ship. In less than 20 minutes, the Dorchester would slip beneath the Atlantic's icy waters. Aboard the Dorchester, panic, and chaos had set in. The blast had killed scores of men, and many more were seriously wounded.

Others, stunned by the explosion were groping in the darkness. Those sleeping without clothing rushed topside where they were confronted first by a blast of icy Arctic air and then by the knowledge that death awaited. Men jumped from the ship into lifeboats, over-crowding them to the point of capsizing, according to eyewitnesses. Other rafts, tossed into the Atlantic, drifted away before soldiers could get in them. Through the pandemonium, according to those present, four Army chaplains brought hope in despair and light in darkness. Those chaplains were Lt. George L. Fox, Methodist; Lt. Alexander D. Goode, Jewish; Lt. John P. Washington, Roman Catholic; and Lt. Clark V. Poling, Dutch Reformed...

Quickly and quietly, the four chaplains spread out among the soldiers. There they tried to calm the frightened, tended the wounded and guided the disoriented toward safety. "Witnesses of that

terrible night remember hearing the four men offer prayers for the dying and encouragement for those who would live," says Wyatt R. Fox, son of Reverend Fox.

One sailor, Petty Officer John J. Mahoney, tried to reenter his cabin but Rabbi Goode stopped him. Mahoney, concerned about the cold Arctic air, explained he had forgotten his gloves. "Never mind," Goode responded. "I have two pairs." The rabbi then gave the petty officer his own gloves. In retrospect, Mahoney realized that Rabbi Goode was not conveniently carrying two pairs of gloves, and that the rabbi had decided not to leave the Dorchester.

By this time, most of the men were topside, and the chaplains opened a storage locker and began distributing life jackets. It was then that Engineer Grady Clark witnessed an astonishing sight. When there were no more lifejackets in the storage room, the chaplains removed theirs and gave them to four frightened young men. When giving their life jackets, Rabbi Goode did not call out for a Jew; Father Washington did not call out for a Catholic; nor did the Reverends Fox and Poling call out for a Protestant. They simply gave their life jackets to the next man in line. As the ship went down, survivors in nearby rafts could see the four chaplains—arms linked and braced against the slanting deck. Their voices could also be heard offering prayers.ⁱ

Their good turn that day is one we are still talking about. Still inspired by. You and I, as long as we are living and breathing on this earth, have the choice every day. Not many of us will be called to give our lives in the way these men did. But every day we do have a choice to serve or not to serve. To use our hands to help or to hurt. To offer God's healing touch: in our eyes, our voice, with our hands and feet.

I will close my sermon today with part of a Litany called, "Hand in Hand" by Sue Downing.ⁱⁱ Let us pray:

Lord, here are our hands. Put in deep pockets to keep them safe. Held behind our backs to keep them hidden from you. Placed over our eyes to blind ourselves to the needs of others. Buried within sand where they are immobilized and useless. Patting ourselves on the back to take credit for all we are and do. Grabbing for the material things of life. Forever pushing you away.

Lord, here are your hands: tireless and always there for us. Beckoning us to come closer. Holding us secure. Lifting us up when we are down. Opening new doors for us. Revealing special gifts you have given us. Showing the way to eternal life. Touching us with overwhelming love.

Lord, we place our hands in yours. Take them to use as you will. No other hands can touch in quite the same way as ours. Lord, hand in hand with you, we are reaching out in love to others, inviting all to experience the abundant life, receiving much more than we give.

Lord, alone our hands are weak, but together, with yours, they are strong. Amen.

ⁱ <https://fourchaplains.org/four-chaplains/>

ⁱⁱ From *Prayers for the Seasons of Life*, 1997, used by permission in Ann Z. Kulp, "A Meditation on Hands," *Spirit Windows: A Handbook of Spiritual Growth Resources for Leaders*, (Louisville, KY: Bridge Resources, 1998), p.70.