

“The Hands of Joseph”
Matthew 1:18-25
Third Sunday of Advent
December 16, 2007

“With sturdy frame and calloused hands, how overlooked, this gentle man.”¹

According to the encyclopedia, hands are the two intricate, prehensile, multi-fingered body parts normally located at the end of each arm of a human or other primate. Hands are the chief organs for physically manipulating the environment. And, as everybody knows, while all hands are basically the same in form and function, the particular hands of each individual can be very different. The hands of a concert pianist, for instance, are usually much different from the hands of a steel worker. The hands of a kindergartener are much different than the hands of a retiree. We have a custom in our church of ending each committee meeting with the joining of hands and the saying of The Lord’s Prayer. At an Evangelism Committee meeting one evening, I stood between Lyle Dike and Nina Clark. Needless to say, Lyle’s hands were of a vastly different size and shape than Nina’s hands—and life is better because of it! Larry is a member of one of the churches I served. He was a contractor by trade, taking over the business his father had established and at which he had worked at since he was old enough to climb a stepladder, but a contractor that was seldom content to sit in the office. He was hands-on, if you know what I mean. It wasn’t above Larry to grab a hammer or a saw and show his workers how to do it right. As a result, his hands were hard, tough, weathered, and strong. On numerous occasions I’ve seen his bare hands wrestle a piece of steel rebar into place. I’ve seen his bare hands take a shovel and make quick work of piles of dirt and stone. But I’ve also seen those same bare hands take his daughter’s hand and reluctantly place it into the waiting hand of her groom. I have seen those same bare hands gently caress the head of his newborn grandsons. Hands tell a lot about a person. I’ll never forget Larry’s tough, experienced, caring hands.

I think Joseph’s hands must have been like that. Tough. Experienced. Caring. The gospels tell us that the betrothed of Mary was a carpenter. Actually, the word that is used

¹ From a poem by Sally Meyer, ©1997

is “tekton,” which translates more accurately to “handyman.” Think, for a moment, of how that line of work must have showed itself in his hands. Hard, calloused palms, and fingernails that were broken and misshapen. Joseph’s hands were hands that had gripped both hammer and saw, had shaped wood and fashioned metal, had taken mud brick, stone, and timber, and then used them to construct homes in which families could live. His were hands that had known hard work and pain, hands that had been cracked by the winter’s wind and blistered by the summer’s heat, hands that struggled to eek out a living for his soon-to-be family. Joseph’s hands were hands that showed that life in this world was rarely easy.

Perhaps that is why his hands were also those that reflected faith. The only real description we have of Joseph is when Matthew tells us that he was “a righteous man.” In the context of that particular era in Hebrew history, that meant that Joseph did his level best to live according to the dictates of the Law of Moses. Every time he would enter or exit his house, for instance, the fingers on his hands would touch the mezuzah fixed to his doorpost and he would repeat the words, “*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad*”—“Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One.” As he prepared to pray, he would have used his hands to attach the tefillin to his left arm and forehead, small boxes in which important passages of scripture would be held. He would have draped his prayer shawl over his head and shoulders and then let his fingers run over its tassels—one tassel for each of the 613 laws of the torah—every morning and every evening as he engaged in ritual prayer. During the Sabbath, of course, his hands would have been idle, except when it was his turn in the synagogue, and then his hands would take the scroll from the attendant, unroll it to the assigned text, and then read from either the Law or the Prophets. And during Passover he would have taken a lamb to the temple to have it slain so his family could properly celebrate that greatest of all days. Joseph’s hands were faithful hands, hands that would offer hospitality to the stranger, that would care for those who possessed no more wealth than he did, and that would readily give a cup of cold water or bit of hot bread to those whose thirst or hunger needed quenching. Joseph’s hard, calloused, weathered hands were also hands that were tempered by his deep and abiding faith in God.

On this third Sunday of Advent, I believe that Joseph's hands tell us an important story. Someone once said that hands "are the lightning rod of the soul." You don't have to be some phony palm reader to know that hands—the way they look, the way they feel, the way they go about their everyday business—tell us so much about a person's life. I believe that simply by looking at Joseph's hands, even if we have to do so only in our imagination, we cannot only see into his soul, but we can also understand the promise of Christmas in a way we never have before. For it is in his hands that we not only see the full range of the human experience, but also how that "good news of a great joy" can change that human experience in the most remarkable of ways. Let me show you what I mean by continuing the story.

Joseph's hands, those hard, weathered, calloused, faithful hands, were now those hands that were wrung with worry, confusion, pain, and grief. You know the familiar story. It was discovered that Mary, his betrothed, was expecting a child. Joseph, who had followed the commandments and traditions of his faith meticulously, had refrained from any contact with Mary. There were to be no intimacies between bride and groom in that time between the announcement of the engagement and the day of the wedding. Knowing his own obedience, he knew that there could only be one possible explanation for Mary's pregnancy. He also knew that the law he tried so hard to follow said that the punishment for that one explanation was public exposure of her sin, which could ultimately lead to her death by stoning. No one would have faulted him for carrying out the law. Yet in spite of his righteousness, and probably because some will argue that true righteousness is always tempered by mercy, he could not find the will anywhere in him to follow the dictates of that law. After all, Mary was his betrothed. Even though this terrible thing had happened, the simple fact that the story implies that he wrestled mightily with what he should do tells us that despite this unforeseen development he still had feelings for her. The hands that had once held her hands so gently during the rite of betrothal were now the same hands that alternated between being wrung with worry and clenched in confusion, anger, and pain. Agonizing over the situation, the only thing he could think of doing was to simply divorce her quietly and hope everything would blow over with time.

And it is not hard to imagine that at this point, with his head now in those hands, the tears of grief, disappointment, and confusion poured over them. Here is how one imagined it:

*Joseph, the faithful carpenter
Ponders the news he keeps concealed
His bride-to-be is found with child—
A father's name is not revealed.²*

Now Matthew tells us that if that struggle was not enough, an angel of the Lord now appeared to Joseph in a dream. Dreams, especially in the biblical world, have always been thought of as ways in which God chooses to communicate with men and women. The ancients thought highly of dreams. To this day even the most secular of psychologists and psychiatrists still put great stock in them. No one has ever given a satisfactory explanation of the details of this particular part of the story. But whatever it was that did happen, the handyman from Nazareth heard the following words: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” I can imagine that Joseph’s hands were initially raised in fear upon seeing and hearing what he did, but perhaps not for the reason you think. It was not the awesome presence of the angel of the Lord that Joseph feared most, rather it was the troubling prospect of going against everything that his faith had taught, not to mention everything he had already decided, and marrying a pregnant woman. “The child conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit?” The words of an angel or not, that was a most preposterous idea. Who had ever heard of such a thing? He was after all, trying hard to live his life as the law commanded. Think of what he was being asked to do. He was told not only to take Mary as his wife, but also to name the child that she would bear, effectively accepting him as his own son. I have to imagine that trying to balance what he knew to be the law of God with what he believed to be the word of God was truly confusing. They seemed to be totally opposed one another. Even more confusing, if it all

² From a poem by C. Marie Byers

was true, then the future of God's plan of salvation now rested in the rough, calloused, righteous hands of this simple handyman from Nazareth.

Yet Matthew reports that, "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him." It is important for us to realize that everything changed at that point. From here on, Joseph was a totally different man. According to the story, there no longer seemed to be any hesitation on his part at all. In contrast to Luke's account of Mary's visitation, when she responded to the angel by saying, "Let it be to me according to your word," Joseph did not say anything. Rather, he simply acted upon the words that he heard. His hands set about doing what they had to do. Why? Well, it could simply be that he was a man of action. As a handyman, he was used to doing things. Considering the dilemma he faced, perhaps doing something was simply the best way to deal with it. But it seems to me that there is probably another, even more important explanation. Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that he was "a righteous man." Remember, that's the only real description we have of him anywhere in scripture. And while those words usually mean that one is obedient to the Law, as Joseph most certainly was, perhaps—in this particular case—they can mean much more than that. Righteousness can also mean a right relationship with God, you see. Righteousness can be seen as a gracious connection between the human and the divine. And if that is the case, then Joseph's righteousness was deeper and more profound than simply his observing of the laws of his faith. His was a righteousness that grew out of a sense of God's presence in his life, a righteousness based more on love than on obligation, a righteousness that allowed him to hear the angelic voice and—against what could only be described as the "family values" of his day—obey its commands. Knowing that God was with him, Joseph could look directly into the situation that confronted him, clearly see it and the way it would impact his life, and then do God's bidding without any thought of the consequences it might bring. He could accept the word that the child was of the Holy Spirit, he could take on the responsibility of bringing the child into his family, and he could deal with the burden of having the future of the entire world resting in his tough, calloused hands.

In writing about his response to the angel’s words, someone said, “Joseph is already facing the ‘you-have-heard-it-was-said-but-I-say-to-you’ tension that will be displayed in the Sermon on the Mount—the tension between the prevailing understanding of the commandments and the new thing that God is doing in Jesus.”³ I like that. I have to imagine that this was not the last time that Joseph put aside the dictates of his religion and followed the mandates of his God. Knowing the influence that fathers can have on their sons, knowing the influence that my father had on his sons, I have to imagine that the young Jesus often saw that old handyman look to the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law. I have to imagine that maybe more than once Jesus saw those tough, weathered, faithful hands untie a donkey on the Sabbath and lead it to water or perhaps take the time to pull an ox out of a well when he should have been going to the synagogue. Perhaps there were those times when he saw those same hands reach out to those that society had rejected or touch those that his religion had said to refrain from touching. Through those hands Jesus may have learned that in difficult moral situations, one who is righteous may have to filter previous understandings of what is right through new perceptions of what is compassionate. Through those hands Jesus may have learned that the law can only truly be fulfilled when love is at its core. And if it is true that hands “are the lightning rod of the soul,” then the young Jesus may have been able to look at the hands of that handyman and not only see the soul of his father in Nazareth, but the soul of his father in heaven as well.

*O Joseph, banish all your fears
And take young Mary as your wife
And be a father to God’s child
Who comes to share in human life.⁴*

Take a moment and look at your hands. Go ahead, don’t be embarrassed—take a look. You know the story that they tell. In many respects, your hands are just like those of Joseph. You may not be a handyman or handywoman, but just like Joseph, you too know

³ M. Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 8*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1995, p. 136

⁴ From a poem by C. Marie Byers

all the difficulties that life can bring. You too know the pain, confusion, disappointment, anger, and all the other emotions that living in this world can bring. You can see it all in the lines, the scars, the wrinkles, and the various calluses of your hands. And because your hands are so like Joseph's, then the same "glad tidings of great joy" that were placed in his hands can also be placed in yours. That's the good news of Christmas. And if you receive those glad tidings, if you cup your hands and let the good news of this season fill them to overflowing, then like Joseph, nothing in your whole life will ever again be the same.