

Nathan Brown
“The Hands of Christ”
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West Side Christian Church

Mark 1:40-45

You can tell a lot about a person by the feel and look of their hands. A calloused and rough hand might suggest continuous physical labor, a love of sport, or a green thumb. A soft, refined hand can indicate a passion for study, a strong dislike for manual labor, or even the value a person places on self-care. Dry skin, nails bitten, small cuts or bruises, wrinkles and lines, crooked fingers, missing digits—you can tell a lot about a person by the feel and look of their hands.

Perhaps this is what makes palm reading so intriguing. Our hands are such an integral part of our bodies, such an important part of who we are, that it would make sense they might indicate something to us about our future. The lines, the crevices, the cracks and imperfections might all combine to suggest something about the imprint we are making or will make on the world.

I have always been fascinated by hands. In fact, I remember one of the first things I noticed about my wife, Marion, was the uniqueness of her hands. We were on one of our first dates. I had finally taken her to a nice, candlelit dinner at a trendy spot in Nashville.

The way she tells it is that, at one point during dinner, I reached over and took both of her hands into mine. She began to get those butterflies one gets in the very beginning of a relationship. Apparently, I was turning her hands over in mine, inspecting them in great detail. She says, “I kept thinking, ‘I wonder what sweet and romantic thing he is going to say about my hands.’” All of the sudden, I gazed right into her eyes and said, “Your hands look really old!”

Of course, immediately, I read her face and realized that I had obviously stuck my foot in my mouth. I started backpedaling with comments like, “I mean, they just looked stressed, they have a lot of wrinkles...” and the hole just got deeper and deeper. No, I don’t know how I convinced her to marry me.

However, as the evening went on and she graciously joked with me about my “hand comments,” we began to talk about her hands in a different way. She showed me how a few of her fingers bend the same way as her grandmother’s did, but how the length of her fingers look more like her grandfather’s. And the lines, well, she gets those from her mother. It was as if her hands became a window through which I got a glimpse into her life. You can tell a lot about a person by the look and feel of their hands.

Before reading this passage from Mark again this week, I had not really contemplated how many times Scripture references hands. In doing some research this

week, I found it is actually one of the most frequently used words in the Bible. In the Old Testament, there are strict laws about the importance of clean hands. The work of God is often done by the hand of God—that hand can be firm or gentle. Of course, the Messiah is to sit at the right hand of God.

The references are just as numerous in the New Testament. In the book of Acts, the laying on of hands is instituted as a way of setting apart one for a particular kind of ministry. In Mark, Jesus tells his disciples that “if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go to the unquenchable fire.” In Luke, in order to prove himself to the disciples, the resurrected Jesus shows them his wounded hands.

Perhaps the most significant way in which hands are referenced Biblically is the way Jesus uses his hands to heal. In the story that immediately precedes our reading this morning, Jesus heals Simon Peter’s mother-in-law. She is sick with fever and the text reads that “Jesus came, took her by the hand, lifted her up, and the fever left her.” Similarly, in our reading this morning a leper comes to Jesus, asking to be made clean. The text reads that Jesus stretches out his hand, touches him, and says to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!”

All of these references caused me to ponder this week what Jesus’ hands must have looked like. Were they smooth? Were they wrinkly? Could you see his veins? Were they withered or dry? Were they scarred? Because we know that Jesus was a carpenter, we can probably guess what they might have looked like. However, the Bible never gives us this much detail into Jesus’ physical appearance. No, instead of knowing what his hands look like, we only know what he did with his hands. Perhaps that is most important.

The appearance of our hands, in many ways, is an indicator of what we do with our hands. What do your hands look like? Go ahead you can look at them. Do your hands show signs of youth? Do they show signs of age? Do they show signs of illness, of health, of grief, or of pain? Do they indicate rough work or delicate work? Are they instruments of healing and love or breaking down and tearing apart?

You can tell a lot about a person by the look and feel of their hands, mostly because hands indicate the way a person lives. We do some of the most important things with our hands: washing babies, helping a child learn to tie her shoe, hugging a person that we care about, holding hands with a loved one, putting a bow on a present, making a meal for our family, patting someone on the back who needs encouragement.

What are we doing with our hands? Are we extending the healing ministry of Jesus through the way that we literally touch people’s lives? Are we being the hands of Christ?

Part of the requirement for Marion’s ordination into the United Methodist Church of Virginia was for her to serve as a part time chaplain at MCV hospital in Richmond.

During her time in the CPE program, she was assigned to be in the Emergency Department. Of course, in the ED, there are a number of protocols to follow; specifically around what they should never touch.

The chaplains were not allowed to touch the patient's clothes or any of the patient's belongings. The chaplains were not to touch any of the medical equipment because most of it was sterilized. Believe it or not, the chaplains were especially told never to touch the patients. When a patient came into the Emergency Room, even if they were bleeding, crying, and screaming, the only thing that chaplains were able to do was comfort the patient with their voice.

One day, during Marion's training, the chaplain she was observing broke protocol. A man came through the ED, and for some reason, the chaplain touched the patient. She took his hand in hers. The chaplain would not move away from him. Marion watched as she never let go of his hand.

All around her there was a buzz of people. The medical staff was shouting out orders and medications, they were calling out to each other for supplies and x-rays. People were racing in and racing out. Beeps were sounding; noises were everywhere. All the while, the chaplain maintained a grip on this man's hand. She only let go when they finally took him back to surgery.

A few hours later, Marion went to check on this same patient, to make sure he was okay to see his family. When Marion told him she was one of the chaplains, he asked if he could confide in her. She said, "Yes." He said, "On the way here, I was so afraid of dying. But from the moment I got into the emergency room, to the time I woke up from my surgery, I think an angel held my hand. Do you think I'm crazy?" Marion said, "No, not at all."

Most of the time, it is not easy to be the hands of Christ, to use our hands in loving, healing ministry, because it requires us to break rules, social norms, and culturally accepted values. I read in one commentary this week that, "Jesus' hand is the supreme expression of mercy that transcends the laws of purity and religious dogma."¹

If you notice, at the end of our story today, after he touches the leper, the text reads that, "Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country, and people came to him." Touching the leper, even though Jesus healed him, rendered Jesus unclean according to the rules and customs of his day.

Because of the choice to use his hand to heal the leper, Jesus has now become an outcast himself. From the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus has put himself on the fringe because of what he chooses to do with his hands.

¹ Ortega, Ofelia. "Mark 1:40-45 (Theological Perspective)." *Feasting On the Word*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. Pg. 358.

What are you doing with your hands? Are your hands keeping you safe, comfortable, and secure? Are your hands making or building things that destroy or tear down? Are your hands working for only your own benefit and not the benefit of others?

Or are your hands working for Christ? Have you touched someone who society deems unclean? Have you served someone who our culture does not value? Have you held the hand of someone who others dare not touch?

The look and feel of ones hands can tell a lot about a person. Even more, what we do with our hands can define who we become.

Because our hands are so important, because we are, in fact, the hands of Christ, I would like to bless our hands this morning. Reach out and grab the hand of your neighbor and receive this blessing upon your hands:

These are the hands of your children, strong and full of love.

These are the hands that will cherish you through the years.

These are the hands that, with the slightest touch, will comfort your people.

These are the hands that will hold others when they are afraid or when they grieve.

These are the hands that will wipe away tears of sorrow, and tears of joy.

These are the hands that will tenderly hold your children.

These are the hands that will attempt to bring peace and not harm.

These are the hands that will fight for justice and never give into what is easy.

These are the hands we carry, but give to you, Lord.

God bless all of these hands you see before you this day. Use them as hands of healing, protection, shelter, and guidance.

Amen.